FOCUS ON THE FAMILY PRESENTS

Adventures in ODYSSEY

YOUNG WHIT™ & the Shroud of Secrecy

Dave Arnold & Phil Lollar

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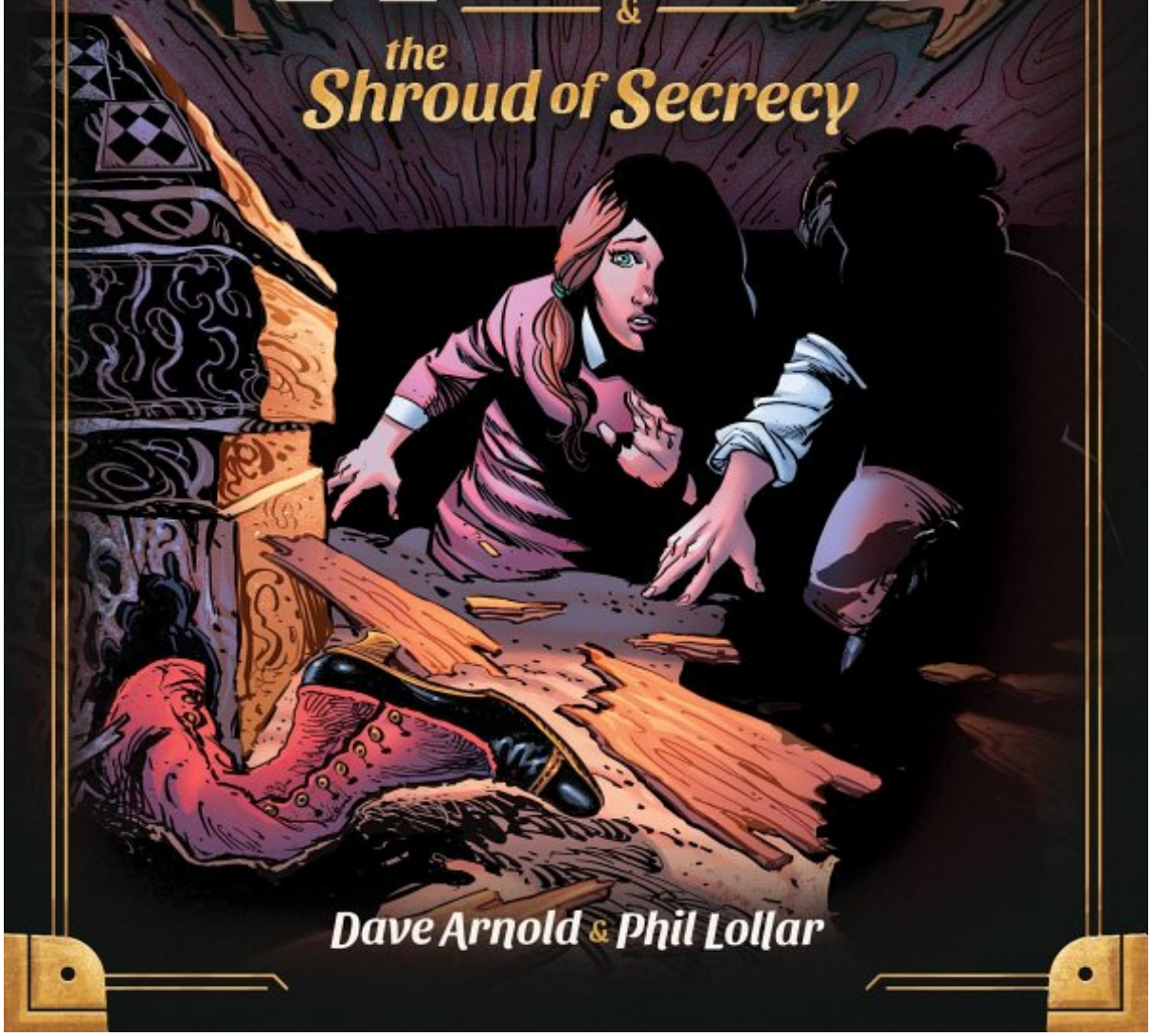

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for

Steve

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Chapter One

John Avery Whittaker stood perched on the rooftop of the oversize shed in his backyard, his breath held in a mix of fear and eager anticipation. From where he stood, the distance to the ground must have been at least twenty feet.

Surely that will be enough to achieve lift, he thought.

His arms wagged up and down, but the drag from the wings he had fashioned out of a mixture of cloth, leaves, and feathers did little to elevate him. Instead, it made his arms feel heavy and tired.

Not a good sign.

His prior attempt with papier-mâché wings failed before it ever began. His stepmother, Fiona, made him abort his flight out of a fair concern that he would break his neck in the attempt. He realized she was right. Those wings were far too heavy. Almost as heavy as his arms felt at this very moment.

But these wings, which had been patterned roughly after Leonardo da Vinci's "ornithopter" flying machine, had enough resistance to displace a good chunk of air—surely enough to levitate a lean ten-year-old boy. And they seemed light enough to somewhat oppose the laws of gravity. At the least, he should land softly enough to avoid a trip to the hospital. That was the hope, anyway.

Johnny stood on the roof's edge, wondering whether this was how young Icarus felt. Johnny had read the Greek myth that detailed Daedalus and his son Icarus's attempt to escape imprisonment by Cretan King Minos, using wings fashioned of feathers held together by wax. Johnny's smile disappeared when he recalled that their attempt failed when Icarus flew too close to the sun. The wax melted, his wings fell apart, and Icarus fell into the sea and drowned.

Undeterred, Johnny girded his courage, flapped his arms fervently, and, setting fear aside—in a leap of faith encouraged by the science of ornithology—jumped mightily into the air.

As his body thrust inches above the rooftop, he imagined himself besting the glorious flight of Orville and Wilbur Wright, the pioneers of aviation.

When he finally awoke from his concussive state to see his father hovering over him, he realized that the Wright brothers' record had surely survived . . . just as he somehow had done.

"John, if you live to be fifteen, it'll be a miracle," his father said.

As Johnny saw his father loom over him, he realized two very important things. The first was that he wanted every kid to have the opportunity to feel the way he felt when he jumped off that ledge. The thrill of that moment, when he experienced the effortless exploits of the simplest baby birds born every day, was unimaginable.

The second was that he wanted every kid to have that experience . . . *without* jumping. As thrilling as the jump had been, it could never surpass the pain of the crash landing.

But as Johnny lay there gasping for breath, he already knew that both joy and pain would most likely be his constant companions through life.

There has to be a way to cheat pain, he thought. *If only we could have the same thrill inside our imagination.*

Chapter Two

Roads are remarkable things. Each curve and turn may present a new view, an unexpected adventure, or an unforeseen challenge. So when John Avery Whittaker walked down the country road of Newbury County, North Carolina, just outside his hometown of Provenance, he wondered what the next bend would hold.

The last few weeks had certainly shaken Johnny's world. He and his friend Emmy Capello had solved a seventy-year-old mystery involving his great-granduncle; the great-grandfather of his nemesis,

Wilson Knox; the grandfather of the school janitor, Benjamin Huck; a mysterious boy Johnny still hadn't met; and a treasure of Confederate gold.

Solving the mystery had made Johnny and Emmy famous around Provenance and pretty well-known throughout the county and state, too. It seemed they couldn't go anywhere in town without someone pointing at them, slapping them on the back, or shaking their hand. And Johnny and his family had only been living in the town for a little more than two months!

The excitement seemed to be wearing down finally, and Johnny was grateful for that. He had lots of other, more important things on his mind.

He trekked along the dusty, tree-lined lane with his dog, McDuff, a cairn terrier with a penchant for not listening. Since the day they met, when Johnny accidentally stabbed him with a sword, the dog had decided to give the boy a little mischief of his own.

The sun alternately peeked through and hid behind clouds that skidded across the October sky. Shafts of light warmed for a moment before the cool fall air reminded him that summer was a thing of the past, and the future.

McDuff sniffed every interesting log, bush, and plant, seemingly gathering some vital piece of information from each. Atop the dog's head sat a makeshift deerstalker cap like the one Sherlock Holmes wore. Johnny tore through mystery novels, and Holmes was his favorite detective of the bunch. He figured that since McDuff always sniffed about for clues, he should be garbed like a detective.

But McDuff hated having the cap on his head. The first time Johnny got it on him, the dog twisted and turned every way he could to get it off, like a wild horse bucking its rider. But eventually he succumbed to the wishes of his master. At least he didn't have to tote the calabash pipe that Holmes smoked. Johnny gave up on that when the ornery dog chewed it in half.

Johnny was on his own investigation. He'd been mulling over what to make of the conversation he'd overheard between his father, Harold, a professor at Duke University, and Harold's colleague, Professor Karl Mangle, a few days prior. Mangle had mentioned what surely was the ancient journal Johnny had found in the old, wooden trunk he'd inherited from his grandfather, Jackson McClintock.

Mangle said he'd been searching for the journal and that it contained information about a special cloth that had power to heal and give long life. Johnny had a strong feeling that Mangle was after the cloth Johnny had wrapped around McDuff after he'd unintentionally stabbed him in the forest while practicing to be one of the Three Musketeers. After all, the pup had seemed to be dying. But when Johnny had returned from getting medical supplies, he'd found the dog *hadn't* died.

He'd been completely healed.

The cloth, neatly folded on the ground beside the pup, hadn't had a spot on it. And that cloth had come from the same place as the journal: the trunk.

Johnny had taken McDuff home and asked for permission to keep him. For Johnny's stepsister, Charlie (their nickname for *Charlotte*), it was love at first sight. They ran and jumped and tumbled and wrestled, McDuff smothering the girl with slobbery dog kisses and Charlie nuzzling into the scruff of the pup's neck and hugging him so tightly his eyes bulged. Fiona also took to the pup. "It'll be good to have a guard dog about the place," she said.

"I don't know about that," Johnny replied. "From what I can tell, he's too much of a coward. It's more likely we'd be protecting him instead."

Johnny turned to his father. Here was where the whole thing would likely hit a wall. His father never cared much for dogs. *What kind of person doesn't like a dog?* Johnny thought. He chalked it up to a character deficiency.

Harold said nothing at first. But between Fiona cocking her head and smiling coyly at him, and Charlie's nonstop stream of begging and pleading—"Please Daddy? He's so cute! We need him and he needs us! Please-please-pleasepleasepleaseplease*pleeeeeeeeaseee*!"—Harold's resolve melted. He sighed deeply, a faint smile at the corners of his mouth. "Fine," he said.

Johnny's father had no difficulty saying no to anyone—except Fiona or Charlotte. They seemed to know how to get him to agree to anything. He turned to Johnny. "But he's *your* responsibility, young man. Not mine, not your mother's, not your sister's. Do you understand?"

"Yes, sir." He understood completely. One wrong move and the dog would be gone.

Normally Johnny might have balked at such a constraint. After all, Charlie clearly loved McDuff, too, so it would only be fair for her to share some of the responsibility of caring for him. But aside from keeping McDuff, Johnny had an ulterior motive for not pushing back at his father's edict—a motive that also had to do with the journal.

At dinner two nights before, Johnny had felt his father staring at him so intently that he wondered whether Harold had burrowed into his mind and was reading his every thought. As they finished dessert and Fiona took Charlie upstairs to get ready for bed, Harold had said, as casually as he could, "I've discovered the meaning of those foreign words your friend Emmy recently asked about. Would you like me to tell her, or would you like to deliver the message to her yourself?"

Johnny's heart had done a flip, but he had remained as casual as he could. "Oh, yeah! I forgot about that!" he'd said. "I can do it, if you want."

Harold's face had remained impassive, but his eyes had bored into Johnny's. He then reached into his pocket, pulled out a folded slip of paper, and slid it across the table. Johnny picked it up and put it in his pocket. "I'll give it to her on the way to school tomorrow."

“Don’t you want to know what it says?”

Johnny shrugged. “Emmy will tell me if she wants me to know.” It wasn’t *exactly* a lie—since he had given the words to Emmy in the first place, she would definitely want him to know. Still, he had felt bad about skirting the issue like this, but then he recalled that his father had also lied to Mangle about where the words came from.

On the way to school the next morning, Johnny gave Emmy the paper with the transcription. “So this one,” he said, pointing to *neamhnaid fior pris,* “means ‘pearl of great price,’ and *this* one—” he pointed to *beatha fhada*—“means ‘long life.’”

Emmy gave him a sideways glance. “I can read, y’know.”

“Old Scots Gaelic?” Johnny smirked.

“*That’s* what that is?” She shrugged, refolded the paper, and put it in her pocket. “Okay, good to know in case I ever go to Scotland.”

“It’s important to know right here in Provenance,” Johnny corrected.

“Why?”

“Because my father might ask you about them.”

She stopped, concerned. “You think he will?”

“I wouldn’t be surprised. I also wouldn’t be surprised if he asked you whether I put you up to giving them to him in the first place.”

“Which you did.”

“Right, but he doesn’t know that.” Johnny started walking again, and Emmy followed.

“Sounds like you think he does.”

He shrugged. “Maybe it’s wishful thinking. I’d prefer to be able to talk to my dad without hiding stuff, but you’ve seen how we are. We just don’t get along that well. Not since my mother died.”

Emmy stopped again. “Wait—Fiona’s not your mom?”

Johnny shook his head. “Stepmom. My birth mom died a few years ago.”

Empathy emanated from Emmy’s face. “I’m so sorry. That must have been really hard.”

“We’re in a great depression. Everything’s hard.”

They trudged the rest of the way to school in silence.

Life had certainly been a mix of challenges and ambiguity, Johnny thought. So many things had gone upside-down in his young life. First his mother died, and soon after, his Grandpa Jackson. After that his father remarried, and they all moved, and everything he loved was gone or being replaced.

The most curious thing of all—the mystery that kept running through Johnny’s mind these last few days—was that Grandpa Jackson wrote Johnny’s name as the final entry in the journal. Why? What reason could there be to write *his* name there? Was it just to designate who was to receive the journal next, or was it something more? And since the journal had been given to him, what was he supposed to do with it, especially since he only knew a smattering of Latin and couldn’t read old Scots Gaelic, either—or any of the other languages in the journal, for that matter?

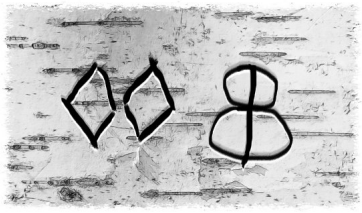
Johnny found that the best way to work through one problem was to mull it over while you worked on another. Either his brain enjoyed the extra activity, or solutions simply came easier when he wasn’t overthinking the issue. Either way, he usually seemed to find a solution better if he let it stew in the sauce of activity. So the next day, which was Saturday, he happily rounded up all the items he needed to create his All Hallows’ Eve costume.

His parents didn’t allow the celebration of Halloween—they said the holiday glamorized evil spirits and witches—but his father did allow them to celebrate All Hallows’ Eve, the night before All Saints’ Day. At first Johnny intended to dress up as d’Artagnan from *The Three Musketeers,* but since that’s how McDuff got stabbed, he quickly went off the idea. And since All Saints’ Day commemorated the saints and martyrs of the church, he thought his stepmother would be pleased if he chose to dress up as the biblical figure he knew the most about: Moses.

And now, as he walked down the road on a glorious fall Saturday with McDuff scampering about, Johnny was about to create his costume. He was a half mile outside of town, carrying the supplies he believed would create a paste that, when combined, would make him glow like Moses' when he descended Mount Sinai after receiving the Ten Commandments. In addition to a few items he found in the forest, like some mushrooms and fungi he had observed glowing in the dark, the clerk at the town drugstore had given him supervised access to anything deemed safe that he needed from its lab supplies —one of the perks of his newfound celebrity status.

Johnny came to the end of the road, then took the short trail leading to what had recently become his favorite spot: a small clearing beside the Enoch River. It nestled up to a rocky mound where a sort of grotto provided a perfect campfire enclosure—and a great place to think and work.

When he arrived, he saw a few empty bean and soup cans littering the ground. Within the trees, about ten yards off, he noticed that several things had changed. Rocks were piled in a heap. A tree that had fallen was moved from where it had lain and was now propped over a hole—it appeared as if someone had been digging. Carved into the side of the tree facing the path were symbols, one that looked like two diamonds, the other like the number 8 divided in half.



Johnny wondered what the symbols meant. He hadn't seen them the last time he came. He frowned, disappointed that someone else had found "his spot." Whoever it was must have camped there.

He quickly built a small fire and began to prepare his glow concoction in a cast-iron pot he had smuggled from the house. He had decided it would be much better to cook the experiment outside. Fiona didn't appreciate it when he created a mess in her kitchen, especially when that mess was accompanied by the odors his

experiments usually brought with them. Besides, she always thought his concoctions would blow up. It had only happened that one time, and that was last year, back in their house in Charlotte—and how could he have known that ethylene glycol had a flash point of 111°C?

He ground up the various components, adding them one by one into the pot. The concoction soon became a soupy mix, and a greenish tint emerged, which brought a smile—and the hint of a radiant glow—to Johnny's face.

Both vanished, however, when McDuff bolted after a squirrel scouring nearby for food. The dog's barks came in rapid succession, twenty or more in five seconds. He sped along, nipping at the squirrel's flailing, bushy tail—jumping over logs, through dead branches, and around moss-covered boulders in hot pursuit.

"McDuff! Get back here!" Johnny commanded. But McDuff either couldn't hear him or chose not to. Johnny took off after the dog, irritated by his mutinous behavior. Within seconds, Johnny found himself near the river's edge, where he slipped on a loose rock and went down hard. He only fell into a few inches of water, but the splash was enough to fairly drench his clothes. He jumped up and renewed his chase, though with a bit more care for where he stepped.

When he emerged at the top of an embankment, he called out, "McDuff! Don't bother coming home, you worthless mutt!"

A voice startled him. "Can I have him, then?"

Johnny whipped around to see two boys, one hunched over McDuff, petting his back, and the other in a rickety old wheelchair. The latter offered a faint smile.

"I wouldn't mind so much," Johnny answered, "but my sister would have a fit."

The boy in the chair nodded. "Let me guess, since your dog is dressed like Sherlock, you must be Watson."

"No, but like Watson, my first name is John." He stuck out his hand. "John Whittaker."

“I’m Steve.” He slowly opened his hand, and Johnny noticed the weakness in Steve’s grip as the boys shook. His arms were very thin, as was the rest of his body. “This goof petting your dog is my kid brother, Paul.”

Paul clarified, “I’m only yew tears younger.”

“Yew tears?” Johnny asked, confused.

“Two years,” Steve corrected. “He gets his words mixed up sometimes.” He studied Johnny carefully. “Hey, aren’t you the guy who solved the Confederate gold mystery?”

Paul piped up. “Yeah! I thought I recognized you! You must be real smart!”

Johnny reddened. “Oh, uh, I had lots of help.”

“Maybe *we* can solve a mystery together! You workin’ on anything right now?”

Johnny shook his head. “No, no mysteries.” *Which isn’t entirely true,* Johnny thought, *but they don’t need to know that.*

Steve sniffed as if he were McDuff searching for squirrels. “Do you smell something burning?”

“My experiment!” Johnny ran back to the fire. Paul pushed Steve’s wheelchair in pursuit, trundling behind Johnny on the worn but uneven path, the bumps jostling Steve around like a rag doll.

“What are you cooking?” Steve asked when they arrived.

“Some stuff I need to make me glow in the dark. I’m making my costume for All Hallows’ Eve.”

“You mean Halloween,” Paul corrected, raising his head from McDuff, who was happily licking his face.

Traitor, Johnny thought. “No. My family doesn’t celebrate that.”

“Boo tad,” Paul said, again twisting his words around. “I get a pillowcase full of candy every year. It lasts for days.”

“I don’t mind. I don’t care much for candy,” Johnny said.

Steve gaped at him. “Seriously? What kid doesn’t like candy? It’s an American institution. Like baseball, hot dogs, and apple pie.”

Johnny shrugged. “I like ice cream sodas.”

“Well that’s something, I guess,” Steve said with a grin.

Johnny stirred the experimental potion. Paul walked up beside him and gazed into the steamy pot.

“That looks about as good as the food my Aunt Patty cooks. Which is bretty pad.”

“It’s not for eating,” Johnny said. “After it cools down, I’ll lather it on my skin. Then I’ll stand outside in the sun. Once it gets dark, I’ll glow for hours. Just a few more ingredients, then it should be done.”

“Whatever floats your boat,” Steve replied. Then, pointing at Paul, he added, “Hey, you don’t have any potions that’ll make him better looking, do ya?”

“Sorry.”

Paul rose up nobly. “How could you improve these gugged rood looks?” He giggled. Then, cocking his head, he clarified, “I mean . . . rugged good looks.”

Johnny looked more closely at Paul. Truth be told, he resembled the drawing of Humpty Dumpty in Charlie’s Mother Goose nursery rhyme book. Nice, but definitely not handsome.

Johnny picked up his backpack, pulled out a couple of paper bags, and offered them to Paul. “You want to add the last few ingredients?”

“Sure. What are they?”

“Sulfur and potassium nitrate. They help light stuff up. At least according to the book I read.”

“Nifty,” Paul said.

Johnny handed him the bags. “Don’t put in too much. Just a little bit of each should—”

But Paul had grabbed as much as each hand would allow and tossed it all into the pot.

There was a loud and blinding flash that seemed to completely engulf Paul’s head. A cloud of fumes hung over him, hiding him from sight. Both he and Johnny coughed and spat, and with ears ringing, Johnny called out, “Are you all right?”

“I think so,” Paul said, sounding dazed. He cleared his throat, and after a few seconds the cloud dissipated. Johnny covered his mouth, while Steve laughed uproariously.

“What?” asked Paul.

“Umm . . . you didn’t have eyebrows and eyelashes before, did you?” Johnny asked, thinking that if Paul didn’t look like Humpty Dumpty before, he sure did now.

Suddenly Steve’s laughter stopped. “Paul! Your hair’s on fire!”

“Aaaaahh!” Paul panicked, running around in circles, batting his head as if he were swatting at a swarm of bees. But the effort did more to fan the flame than extinguish it.

“The river!” Johnny yelled. “Douse your head in the river!”

Before you could say Jack Robinson, Paul ran to the riverbank and jumped in, dunking his head beneath the water.

Unfortunately, the damage was already done. When Paul emerged, Johnny and Steve saw half his hair had been singed off. All that remained were tiny curls, shriveled up at the tips that broke off when Paul touched them.

“I’m so sorry!” Johnny said.

A goofy look spread across Paul’s face, and he said, “It’s not your fault. Besides, I’ve been needing a haircut.”

“Well, I’d say your experiment is a success,” Steve said, laughing. “Paul’s proof that your concoction does make people glow!”

At that, all the boys laughed.

“You look kind of like Curly from the Three Stooges,” Steve cackled.

“Nifty! He’s my stavorite fooge! Nyuck! Nyuck!” Paul said.

Johnny doused the campfire and poured his elixir into a bottle. Then the boys made their way home, laughing and chatting as if they’d been friends their whole lives.

Once they were out of sight, an older, disheveled black man with a round nose, a worn overcoat, and a tan hat covering tufts of frizzy gray hair emerged from behind a large white oak tree. He walked up to the firepit and spat in the embers.

He looked over to the mound. “It’s a good thing they didn’t find you, Rakia,” he said aloud to the mound. “If they had, I’d have had to take care of ’em.”

He sat, removed his hat, and scratched his gray head with a dirty hand. “I jus’ got you buried, girl! I suppose I’d best move you somewheres else, though. But where?”

He climbed onto the rock mound and looked around. Through the tree line, something caught his eye: the top of the Provenance Town Hall clock tower. He shook his head. “No, not there . . .” He thought for a long moment and then muttered, “But maybe . . . Yup. *That’s* the place. I’ll dig ya up and bury ya there instead. *No* one’ll find ya *there*!” He grinned, exposing his missing teeth. “I’ll do it tonight. There’s no moon tonight.”

He spat again. “A fella can never be too careful.”

Chapter Three

It was early afternoon the following Monday, and Johnny's last class had just ended. As he did most days after school, he wandered down to the basement, where Ben Huck, the school janitor and handyman, worked. Johnny was pleased and relieved that Ben had gotten his job back after he'd been arrested while helping Johnny with the Confederate gold adventure. They had become fast friends.

Ben sat at his workbench, staring at a piece of machinery. Johnny crept up beside him and said, "Trying to control it with your mind?"

Ben started, put a hand to his chest, and said, “Boy, you tryin’ to get this piece of machinery wrapped upside your head? Don’t scare me like that!”

Johnny laughed and held up his hands. “Sorry!”

Ben chuckled along with him. “School’s out already, huh? Seems like you sixth graders ought to have a longer day. You got lots to learn.”

“You can’t learn it all in a classroom,” Johnny countered. “So what are you working on?”

“Not working yet. Just ponderin’.” Ben held up the mechanism. “These are the internal mechanics of an electrical school bell. I love the simplicity of this machine and the innovation that created it. I’uz wonderin’ whether I might be able to utilize the technology in other ways.”

“Like what?”

“I ain’t sure yet. But . . . it’ll come to me eventually.” Ben’s powerful, scarred hand maneuvered his screwdriver between the striker and the contact. “So simple, but so ingenious.”

“Sort of like me!”

Ben peered over his spectacles. “Yeah, only humble.” They chuckled again.

After a moment of silence as Ben continued to tinker, Johnny asked, “Ben, do you think it’s possible to invent things that can make you live longer?”

Ben lowered the screwdriver and peered over his spectacles at Johnny again. “Now why are you worried about stuff like that? You’re just a sprout.”

“I’m not exactly worried. Just . . . wondering.”

“Well, I think people have been inventing things that do that for a long time, actually. New medicines keep folks alive longer. And doctors learn things all the time that help ’em treat patients better.”

“But I mean inventing something that can just give you long life.”

Ben smiled and went back to tinkering. “Boy, if you’re lookin’ for a fountain of youth or some science-fiction nonsense, you got a long look comin’. The good Lord’s the only one to decide that.”

“I suppose.”

“You suppose? You ought to know.”

“To be honest, I don’t really buy into that God stuff much.”

Ben twisted the screwdriver, loosening a bit of the mechanism. “Oh, and why’s that?”

“My mom died when I was little. I figure if there really is a God, He wouldn’t have taken her from me. I needed her.”

Ben stopped and scratched his whiskered face with the tip of the screwdriver. “So, you’re sayin’ you know better than God? How do you know what you need, boy? I’m a growed-up man, nigh onto forty years old, and I still got no idea what all I need.”

“Every boy needs his mother, especially when he’s a kid,” Johnny replied.

“True ’nuff.” Ben went back to the device. “He do. But we need the good Lord more. I expect your mama would tell you the same thing. Don’t shove the Lord aside. He’s the only one who can make sense of it all.”

Johnny said nothing in reply, instead turning his attention to a metal device on the floor beside the workbench. “What’s this for?” he asked, pointing.

“Working on an idea to automatically feed the coal into the furnace. It’s a mighty chore, shovelin’ coal.”

Johnny carefully looked Ben over. “Did your dad teach you how to do this stuff?”

“Nah, mostly picked it up m’self. My brain don’t rest much. I got lots of ideas that need figurin’ out. Your daddy help you?”

Johnny shook his head. “He’s too busy. And he doesn’t really like to work with his hands. He’d rather read books.”

“Don’t you enjoy readin’?” Ben asked, still tinkering.

“Sure. But I suppose I’d rather be *doing* something.”

Ben shrugged. “I find that doin’ gets a whole lot more productive when it comes after readin’. I wish I’da read my granddaddy’s writin’ more when I was younger—as you know. Learning from them that came before us means we can build off the things they discovered. That way we can start from where they left off. No sense reinventin’ the wheel, boy.”

Johnny nodded thoughtfully as he watched Ben work. “I wish I could invent something really important. Something that would make a difference.”

Ben peered over his glasses at him. “Now you know you already made a big difference to lots of folks in this town.”

Johnny nodded reservedly. “Yeah, but that’s not what I mean. I mean something . . . amazing . . . and incredible . . . and . . . amazingly incredible! Like inventing a . . . a machine that . . . I dunno, does something amazing!”

Ben chuckled. “Look boy, there’s lots’a ways to make a difference. Some are—” he mimicked Johnny—“‘amazing,’ like inventin’ an incredible machine!”

Johnny laughed.

Ben went on. “And some are practical, like buildin’ a car or somethin’ that helps folks physically. And some are ways of just helpin’ folks cope with what’s goin’ on in their lives—like you did. But all of ’em take understanding.”

“Maybe it’s possible to do all of them at the same time,” Johnny thought aloud.

Ben’s eyebrows rose. “Maybe you can. What about that experiment of yours?”

“Which one?”

“You got more than one goin’? I only heard about that glow-formula thing for your costume.”

“Oh . . . yeah. I finished it down by the river. That’s where I met Steve and Paul.”

“Who and who?”

Johnny slapped his forehead gently. “That’s what I came down here for. Do you know Steve and Paul? Steve’s in a wheelchair.”

Ben laid the bell on his workbench. “Oh, yeah! Course I know ’em. In a town this small, everybody knows everybody.”

“They seem nice.”

“They’re two peas in a pod. Seems like if one gets an itch, the other starts scratchin’.”

“They must not go to school here. I hadn’t seen them before.”

Ben shook his head. “They don’t. I’m not sure where Paul’s schoolin’, but there’s a place in Durham that takes on kids with physical ills—that’s where Steve goes. And make no mistake: That boy is bright. And talented! He can draw like nobody’s business. You say you met ’em down by the river?”

“Yeah. Paul sorta helped me with my glowing formula experiment.”

“Whadaya mean, ‘sorta’?”

A sheepish look crossed Johnny’s face. “Well . . . let’s just say I know now to never let another kid add ingredients in my experiments for me. I mean, I thought everyone knew to be careful when you’re combining combustible elements.”

“Uh-oh. What happened?”

“People look really different without eyebrows and eyelashes.”

Ben snorted, stifling a chuckle.

“Paul won’t need a haircut for a while, either.”

Ben threw back his head and busted out in a deep-throated laugh. Johnny joined him.

Then Ben stopped, suddenly serious. “You know, you probably shouldn’t hang out down at the river by yourself. Drifters stay there. Ain’t safe for kids.”

Johnny’s smile faded. “I’ve never seen any thereabouts. Though I did see some empty cans littering my favorite spot there.”

“Well, like I say, you best not go by y’self, y’hear?”

Johnny nodded. “Yes, sir.”

Ben's smile returned. "Good. Now you should get on home. Your folks'll be wonderin' about you." He turned back to the mechanism.

Johnny stood up and walked to the door. When he got there, he stopped and looked back at his friend. If there was one thing Johnny had realized since he'd moved to Provenance, it was that he could trust two people: Emmy and the man in front of him, puttering on that school bell. Ben had helped him, encouraged him, advised him, and even gone to jail for him. He should be able to tell Ben about his latest mystery with the journal and the cloth, right? "Ben . . ."

Ben turned and peered at him over his spectacles again. "Somethin' else, boy?"

Johnny opened his mouth . . . and then closed it and sighed. "No. Nothing. Thanks for the talk. See you later."

Ben smiled. "Bye, now." He turned back to the workbench.

Johnny opened the door, stepped out of the room, and closed the door softly behind him. He had never felt more alone in his life. He desperately wanted to trust somebody with his news of the cloth, someone who could help him make sense of it. But who?

Chapter Four

The sun had just set as Professor Karl Mangle pulled into the garage behind his house at 236 Custer Avenue. His mind was still spinning over his discovery that the phrases Harold Whittaker had asked him to translate several days ago were actually from an ancient journal describing the cloth that held incredible power. Mangle's belief that the cloth existed had been validated, and that knowledge consumed him. He had given up hope years ago, but now, perhaps . . .

Whittaker had said that the paper with the phrases on it came from an old book he'd bought about the history of Scotland, but Karl knew that wasn't true. First, Harold claimed he couldn't find the book when he went to look for it, but Whittaker was the most organized person he'd ever met. He never misplaced anything.

Second, Harold was a bad liar. He obviously had little practice in the art of deception, which Karl supposed made sense for a professor of theology. Whittaker exhibited all the telltale signs: looking away, crossing his arms, and leaving the room. And then when he returned, that fake expression of surprise and frustration that he couldn't find the book was enough to nearly make Mangle *erbrechen*, or "vomit." No, either Whittaker had possession of the journal, or he knew the person who did.

Mangle exited his car, grabbed his briefcase from the backseat, and made his way through the gathering darkness toward the house. The chill of winter spiked the air as he slogged through the fallen leaves on the driveway. Every autumn he wished that he didn't have such massive trees in his yard. Trees, like dogs, shed too much. He would have to spend a full day raking up and bagging all the leaves littering his property. He pondered chopping down the oaks and replacing them with something from the pine family. Yes, they shed needles, but unlike dogs, they didn't shed too much.

He entered through the back door to find his wife, Frieda, pulling a tray from the oven.

"I kept your dinner warm," she said with a glaze of ice in her tone. "You didn't say you'd be late."

Karl set his briefcase and keys on the counter. "Papers to grade" was his sole apology.

He had grown distant from Frieda over the past few years, partly because of the pressures of his work schedule, but mostly because both felt a good deal of anxiety over their family situation. They didn't

talk about it anymore, preferring to ignore it in the hope that things would resolve themselves one way or the other. Saying nothing was easier than picking the scab off the wound repeatedly.

Karl sat at the table as Frieda placed a plate of liver and onions in front of him. *Ich kann es nicht glauben! She knows I hate liver and onions!* he thought. *Probably why she made it.*

He considered telling her the news about the journal. He'd thought he had a lead on its whereabouts seven years ago, but it came to nothing. They had both pinned their final hopes on it, only to have them dashed when his search came to a dead end. *Nein.* Better to say nothing to her until he could find out more. Harold would not readily give the information about the journal's whereabouts. He'd have to come up with some other way. Perhaps Harold's wife, Fiona? Or one of his children?

The phrases on the paper kept repeating in his mind: *neamhnaid fior pris*—"pearl of great price." And *beatha fhada*—"long life."

He *had* to find that journal. It was the only way to locate the cloth.

Karl ate a few bites of the liver and pushed the plate away. *Some things were never meant to be eaten*, he thought.

Frieda picked up the plate and deposited it in the sink. "I'm going to bed," she said, then crossed the room and walked up the stairs.

Once she left, he didn't give her another thought. His mind instead returned to his time in the Holy Land. He had been researching artifacts in Jerusalem and the surrounding area when he met a man in the field who was full of energy, enthusiasm, and the passion that comes from new adventures.

"American?" the man had asked.

"Yes, by way of Germany. I'm a professor of religious languages at the University of North Carolina. Karl Mangle."

He had offered his hand. "Harold Whittaker. I'm an American as well, though I live in Scotland presently."

“Well, it’s *gut* to meet someone who speaks the same language. Talking in Hebrew is an exhausting exercise. You have to think before saying each word.”

He had grinned. “That’s probably a good idea in any language.”

The two men hit it off instantly. The following weeks were spent mostly together, moving from site to site, sharing dreams and ambitions. After they parted, they kept in contact through the years. Karl told Harold about openings at North Carolina and later at Duke University and gave him a glowing reference. He was pleased when Harold accepted each position.

After Mangle felt he could fully trust Harold, he told him about a discovery he had been privy to—a cloth that supposedly had the power to heal. Harold was enthralled at the information, though it was likely, he said, nothing more than a myth. “Legends,” he deduced, “oftentimes breed great enthusiasm, but rarely do they breed fact.”

Karl now stood, walked to the refrigerator, and took an orange from inside. He peeled it and then, grabbing his briefcase, went into his study and sat behind his desk.

Opening the left drawer, he slid back the fake bottom, revealing a number of letters. He thumbed through them and, finding the one he was looking for, pulled it out.

We regret to inform you that your application as a member of the Center of Scientific Understanding has been rejected. While we appreciate your interest in C.O.S.U., we have rigid standards for admission that must be met. We wish you the best in your advancement of knowledge.

Sincerely,
Alois Goetkin, C.O.S.U. Secretary

Karl folded the letter and returned it to the hidden compartment. His bitterness rose up again. He intended to prove them wrong, and the cloth was his means to do it. If he could prove the existence of the cloth and its ability to do what it was purported to do, he would not only be accepted into their organization, but he would also demand a position of rank.

A cloth that could heal and extend life—*that* would eclipse every artifact and invention in C.O.S.U.'s inventory. It would launch them into the forefront of scientific discovery. And before all that, it could restore his family, and perhaps his marriage.

The clock on the mantel chimed eleven. Mangle picked up his orange, eating it as he walked. At the top of the stairs, he paused in front of the door where Frieda slept. He walked on toward the spare room, deciding to sleep there instead.

The door to the boys' room was slightly ajar, the hall light left on to chase away the bogeyman. He stepped inside.

Both boys slept. He checked their covers, pulling them up to make sure the boys stayed warm. He'd heard there was a lot of sickness going around, and that was the last thing they needed.

In the second bed, his oldest stirred. "Dad?"

"Sorry. I was just checking on you."

"You're home late again."

"*Ja, liebling*. I'm very busy right now with work and all."

"We haven't seen you in days. You won't be gone again this weekend, will you?"

"I'm not sure yet. We'll see. How was your day?"

"Okay. I made a new friend this week."

"*Das ist gut!* Now get to sleep. You need to stay healthy. Your lungs can't handle these colds going around. I don't want you landing in the hospital again."

"Yes, sir."

Karl walked past the rickety wheelchair leaning against the wall and through the door, closing it behind him.

“Leave it cracked open!” the boy pleaded.
“I will. Good night.”
“Night, Dad. Love you.”
“*Und ich liebe dich*, Steve.”

Chapter Five

The next morning, Johnny waited on Emmy's porch, ready for their walk to school. She was late, as usual, which was frustrating because he liked being prompt. But after all they had been through in their short friendship—mystery solving, treasure finding, clearing his family name, and threats of bodily harm—he supposed lateness wasn't that big of a deal after all. He wondered at that moment whether he should tell her everything about the journal and the secrets it held.

No, he decided. At least not yet.

Johnny watched as each breath he exhaled formed into a miniature cloud. He imagined small lightning bolts streaking out of some, while others produced tiny blizzards. Then he imagined teeny people under those clouds, weathering the storms with teenier umbrellas.

“Why does it do that?” Emmy said.

Johnny started. “What?”

Emmy came out the door. “Why can we see our breath when it’s cold outside?”

Gathering his book bag, he followed her off the porch, away from their homes on Magnolia Lane, and down the road toward school. “Well, we all have a lot of moisture in our lungs. And in winter there’s less moisture in the air. So when your warm breath hits the cold air, the moisture condenses into little droplets of water. It’s the same way clouds form.”

“You just made that up,” Emmy teased.

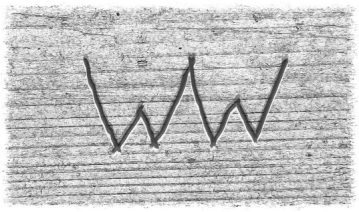
“Nope. Ask Mr. Bustamonte.”

“I did ask him last week. He just said the best way to learn was to find out for myself.” She frowned and added, “I don’t think he knew.”

They walked quietly for a while, stepping intentionally on all the ice puddles along the way. It became a contest, and Emmy quickly built a lead. Out of the corner of his eye, Johnny spotted a symbol that looked like two Ws scratched into a fence. He stopped to look at it.

“What’s wrong?” Emmy asked.

“Have you noticed these symbols popping up around town?”



Emmy shrugged. “No. Why?”

“Just curious. I don’t remember seeing them before.” He reached out to touch the scrawl in the wood when a

German shepherd on the opposite side of the fence jumped against it, snarling, barking, and snapping. Johnny leapt back, and Emmy laughed.

“Crazy dog scared me half to death!” he exclaimed.

“Really? I couldn’t tell!”

They resumed walking. “Hey, you’re still planning on coming over tonight for our Halloween party, aren’t you?” she asked.

Johnny nodded. “Yeah, in fact I’m trying out my costume right now. Can’t you see it?”

“You’re coming as a schoolboy?” she said. “That’s disappointing.”

“No!” He pulled back his left coat sleeve. His arm was green from wrist to elbow. “What do you think of this?”

“You’re coming as a pickle?”

“Very funny. I developed a compound that, once I’m adequately exposed to the sun, should make me bioluminescent.”

“I have no idea what that means,” Emmy spouted, still distracted by looking for ice puddles.

Johnny smiled proudly. “It means . . . I’ll *glow*.”

That got her attention. Emmy stopped in her tracks. “You mean, like a firefly?”

“Yeah, though I’m not planning to be a bug. I’m dressing up like Moses when he came down the mountain with the Ten Commandments. If you believe in that sort of thing.”

Emmy looked confused. “Of course. Doesn’t everybody?”

Johnny gave her a furtive glance but decided not to press the topic. “What’s your costume?” he asked.

“I’m going as Dorothy from *The Wizard of Oz*. It’s my favorite book.”

“You’ll need a Toto. Want me to bring McDuff?” Johnny offered.

“He actually does look like Toto,” she said brightly. “Yeah, that would be great!”

He watched her crunch another ice puddle. She was far ahead in the ice-puddle-crunching contest, thirty-five to seventeen, but it didn't matter. His heart was not in the game, nor was his mind. Both were centered on the cloth.

He wondered about the history of it. Where did it come from? How could a cloth heal anybody? How did it come to be in his family's possession? Why wasn't it in a museum or being studied by scientists who could harness its power and help people with it? The inventor inside him wondered if he could be the person to do that. He could make a name for himself and be famous, and his discovery could end all sickness. The thought of it made him feel exhilarated . . . and nervous.

So much responsibility. And so much power.

He began to imagine his life as a Nobel Prize–winning physician, traveling the globe and healing diseases in India and Africa and China and the South Pacific. He was mid-trance when he caught Emmy looking at him with that look she often wore: part curiosity, part sympathy.

"Where are you?" she asked.

"I'm right next to you, though a few seconds ago I was in the South Pacific." He smiled.

She shook her head and muttered, "Boys. Daydreaming when you should be concerned about more important things."

More important than developing a cure for every sickness? he thought. Instead he asked, "Such as?"

"Figuring out some way you could come trick-or-treating," she answered. "It'll be a perfect night for it." Johnny didn't respond. "Why don't you ask your dad?" she added. "Maybe he'll let you go after all."

"I doubt it. My dad doesn't usually change his decisions."

"It doesn't hurt to ask, does it?"

"Doesn't help either. My dad's about as pliable as a steel rod," he said aloud.

“Well, you’re pretty clever. How can you bend a steel rod?”

“It would take a lot of force.”

“Or a way to make it look like it was bent,” Emmy suggested.

Johnny scrunched his eyebrows. “What do you mean?”

She looked at him as if he were being silly. “You’re the scientist,” she said. “How do you make a solid object appear to be bent?”

He thought for a minute, and then the light bulb went on. “Refraction. By bending light, say, through a prism, or even water, you can make rigid objects appear to bend when the only thing actually bending is the light itself.”

“See, I knew you’d figure it out,” she said, smiling.

“But how does refraction help me change my dad’s mind about trick-or-treating?” he pressed.

They had arrived at the school doors. Emmy looked down at Johnny’s green-tinted arm. A cloud passed overhead, and his limb began to glow softly. “Like I said, you’re the scientist.” She turned and walked inside, calling back, “You’ll figure *it* out, too.”

Johnny thought for a moment, and an idea crept into his mind. It would mean a trade-off: sharing something he knew but didn’t want to share for something he wanted to do but couldn’t. However, it just might be what he needed to make his father’s steel-rod mind more pliant.

Chapter Six

Seven hours later, Johnny put refraction into action. He walked into the Religious Studies Department of the Humanities College at Duke University and up to the front desk. An angular woman sporting black horn-rimmed glasses and a blue paisley dress looked up from her typing as he approached. Her smile was punctuated by two symmetrical dimples, one on each side of her mouth.

“Can I help you with something, dear? I’m pretty sure you’re not a student here. Too young,” she said with a wink.

“I’m Professor Harold Whittaker’s son. I’d like to see him,” Johnny replied.

“Oh!” She adjusted her glasses and examined him more closely. “Now you mention it, I do see the resemblance!” She giggled and held out her hand. “I’m Mrs. Drexler, department secretary. Nice to meet you!” They shook. Her hand was clammy. “You know where your father’s office is, I expect?”

“Actually, no, ma’am. This is my first time here. We haven’t lived here very long. I’ve wanted to come, but—”

Mrs. Drexler’s phone rang. She reached for it and said, “Take the first right, then the second left. It’s three offices down. His name’s on the door. I don’t know if he’s there, though. I think he’s teaching a class.” She picked up the phone. “Religious Studies Department, Mrs. Drexler speaking. How may I help you?”’

As she continued to talk, Johnny walked down the hallway, his footsteps echoing along the reverberant passage. The occasional sound of voices rumbled behind closed doors, and a stray student walked quickly down an intersecting passage. Otherwise the halls seemed deserted.

A shaft of light glimmered through a window perched high on the outermost, east wall. Flecks of dust floated lazily, eventually landing on the hardwood floor planks, only to rise again as he trod on them.

Johnny had taken the right turn and was about to make the left when he saw a placard on a door that bore a familiar name.

Dr. Karl Mangle.

A rush of ideas flooded Johnny’s mind. Mangle knew about the cloth, and he had been searching for the journal. He knew about its power to heal. And he had translated the ancient text for Harold.

He must have loads of books that tell about the cloth, Johnny thought. He looked up and down the hallway.

Deserted.

The only thing standing between him and possible answers was the door in front of him.

He knocked softly.

No answer.

He tested the knob.

Unlocked.

He hesitated. Should he go in? Sure, he and Ben had broken into Provenance Town Hall, which led to his solving the mystery of the Confederate gold, but that had gotten Ben arrested. Besides, sneaking into someone's private office seemed different somehow. If he got caught . . .

He debated with himself for a few more seconds and then decided it was worth the risk. He quietly turned the knob and peeked inside the room.

Empty.

He took a deep breath, slipped inside, and gently closed the door behind him, his heart racing.

The room looked like a library. Hundreds of books lined bookshelves on every wall from floor to ceiling. More books were scattered in piles on the floor, in chairs, and on the desk. There were more books here than in his father's inner sanctum, and that was saying something. Immediately to his right was what looked like a small antechamber Mangle used to store even more books, along with office supplies, a coffeepot, a bottle of clear liquid, a few boxes of cookies, and a jar of Tootsie Rolls. Another door in the antechamber led to a small restroom.

Johnny moved to the shelves and scanned a few titles.

The Eleusinian Mysteries
Twelve Lectures on the Connexion between Science and Revealed Religion
Historia Croylandensis
Discoveries in the Ruins of Nineveh and Babylon
The Tomb of Tut-Ankh-Amen
The Book of the Dead

Enthruscarum Antiquitatum Fragmenta

Johnny wasn't sure what he had expected, but most of these titles were way beyond him. Many were in differing languages, and even the English books read like a foreign language. He pulled one and then another from the shelf if a title looked as though it could be even remotely connected to the cloth. He wished there were an encyclopedia that translated dense books like these into regular people's language, but he found none among the books lining Mangle's shelves.

After searching about ten minutes, he was ready to give up when he saw the corner of a note sticking out of the top of a book buried under a stack of papers: *Journey through Arabia Petraea, to Mount Sinai, and the Eternal City of Petra, the Edom of the Prophecies.* The note corner had a lone word visible on it.

Neamhnaid.

One of the words from his ancient journal.

He opened the book and pulled out the note. It was the translation of the phrase that Emmy had asked Harold to translate for her—confirmation that Harold had given it to Mangle. "*Neamhnaid fior pris* . . . *beatha fhada.*" Directly below it was scrawled another phrase: Μαργαριτάρι της μεγάλης τιμής—μακροζωία. The scratching looked familiar, though he couldn't say why.

Other phrases followed, but he couldn't make heads or tails of any of them. Then several names were listed.

Lucian
Sir William
The Order of the Holy Sepulcher
Sir Gawain Mac Illiuntaig

He decided to copy everything down, so he opened the desk drawer to search for a piece of blank paper. Just then he heard a muffled voice outside the door, calling to someone in the hallway.

Johnny quickly shut the desk drawer, shoved the paper back in the book and the book back under the stack of papers, and ran to the door. Just as he got there, the knob turned and the door thrust open. Johnny lurched sideways to stay behind it. Karl Mangle entered, mumbling to himself.

Johnny hoped against hope that Mangle would not close the door behind him.

Mangle didn't, but he continued mumbling to himself. ". . . *meine Zeit verschwenden* . . . no interest in breaking out of their linear thinking . . ." He walked toward his desk, and the door began to swing shut on its own. Johnny caught it and pulled it back to conceal his presence. Fortunately, Mangle was so preoccupied that he didn't notice.

Johnny heard Mangle sit down at his desk and riffle through some papers. Then Mangle gasped. "Where is it? I left it right here!"

Footsteps entered from the hallway. "Where is what?"

It was Johnny's father.

Mangle composed himself a bit. "Oh, hello, Whittaker. A paper I've written. The demise of Roman influence in North Africa in the seventh century."

"Sounds interesting," Harold said, and Johnny thought he actually meant it. Johnny heard his father walk away from the door and up to Mangle's desk. "Speaking of misplacing things, I looked again last night, and I still can't find it," Harold said.

"What?"

"The book on Scottish history. Silly of me to misplace it, but I am a bit absentminded. Fiona tells me—"

"Don't insult me, Harold," Mangle snapped. "I know the phrase didn't come from that book."

"Oh? Where did it come from, then?"

Johnny marveled at how calm his father could remain even when caught in a lie.

There was a long pause before Mangle said, “It doesn’t matter.”

Johnny took a chance and peeked around the door’s edge. His father’s back was to him, obscuring Mangle from view.

Harold said, “You seem a little testy today, Karl. Is everything all right?”

Mangle bolted up from his desk, red-faced. Johnny pulled back behind the door.

“In Germany I would say, *Da beißt sich die Katze in den Schwanz*, which in English means, *The cat is biting her own tail.* Things are going in circles without getting resolved.”

“Nothing serious, I hope.”

“Things with my wife are, shall we say, strained. Plus I’ve had a few investment setbacks. And the doctor bills are piling up.”

“How’s your boy?”

Mangle’s chair squeaked as he plopped back down into it. “Getting weaker and weaker. It’s only a matter of time. This disease, it’s . . . *grausam*. Cruel.” He stopped, gathering his emotions. “The irony is that someday he’ll get some little problem like a cold, and his body will not be able to fight it off. The cold becomes pneumonia, and a young boy dies. It makes no sense.”

“No, it sure doesn’t,” Harold agreed gravely. “Fiona and I are praying for Steve and your whole family. We may not be able to make sense of it, but at least God knows.”

Johnny blinked. Professor Mangle was Steve and Paul’s *father*?

A tone of disgust laced Mangle’s words. “I know you teach theology, Whittaker, but I didn’t suppose you actually *believed* it.”

“You don’t? You’re a professor of religious languages, after all.”

“It is my field of study, not my lifestyle.”

“Well, if anything would prompt me to a search for God, it would be a sick child.”

“If there were such a thing as God, we wouldn’t have to search for Him. We wouldn’t have diseases that kill children, or hurricanes that destroy towns, or people starving because of drought.”

Or mothers taken away from their sons, thought Johnny, and he was instantly uncomfortable that he and Mangle actually agreed on the topic of God.

Mangle exhaled, trying to recompose himself. “Religion has its place, Whittaker, but the answer to our questions has and always will come from *Wissenschaft*. Science.”

“I appreciate the value of science. It’s one more component to help me understand God.”

“*Ach! Gut!* Then you agree that both are necessary?”

“Of course.”

Johnny peered around the door again, hoping for a moment he could sneak around and get out without being seen. But Mangle was standing, his hands on his desk, leaning toward his father. “Tell me, have you ever heard of C.O.S.U.?”

Harold instinctively frowned. “You mean, the Center of Scientific Understanding?”

Mangle’s eyes widened. “You *do* know it. I’m impressed. At least you read more than just the Bible.”

“The Bible is science, history, anthropology, psychology, political science, *and* religion. You could make an argument for a few other core studies as well.”

“*Ja, ja, ja*,” Mangle said dismissively. He walked around the desk and sat on its edge. “I’ve been applying for membership with C.O.S.U., Whittaker. It’s very difficult to get in. You have to prove a breakthrough in one of their fields of study to garner any interest.”

“They focus primarily on longevity, don’t they?”

“They do, but they’re also engaged in advanced forms of medical science. Some conventional; others . . . less so.”

“Meaning?”

Mangle leaned in. “There are many ways to achieve the same result. What if one of those ways is something people would consider, shall we say . . . bizarre?”

A wry smile spread across Harold’s face. “Sounds as if you’re talking about how some people view faith.”

Mangle nodded. “*Ja*, as I said, religion has its place. But consider this: What if the thing you call ‘faith’ were actually the result of an explainable, scientific fact? What if there were a scientific reason for why Jesus could heal people?”

“Such as?” Harold asked.

“Such as a chemical or electrical interaction unique to his body chemistry that interacted with other people’s bodies in a way that destroyed disease.”

“I would say that, if that were proved to be true, it wouldn’t change the fact that God made it possible.”

“*Gut! Gut!* So to prove such a theory would serve both the scientist’s and the theologian’s purposes, would it not?”

Harold mused for a moment. “What are you suggesting, Karl?”

Mangle stood and walked to the window. His back was to the door, as was Harold’s. Johnny saw the chance to get out. He snuck around the door and quickly tiptoed out. Halfway through, he heard Mangle say, “I believe you know where the journal is.”

Johnny stopped in the hallway, waiting to hear his father’s answer.

Suddenly, a voice down the hall called out, “Did you find him?” It was Mrs. Drexler.

Johnny didn’t know what to do, but he just smiled and waved and ran toward his father’s office, finally taking that left turn in the hallway. He stopped and peered around the corner to see Mrs. Drexler shrug and walk back toward her desk. He then saw Mangle poke his head out his door in Mrs. Drexler’s direction. Johnny quickly ducked behind the wall and ran into his father’s office.

He plopped into a chair and desperately tried to catch his breath as his chest heaved with each pounding heartbeat. He turned his head to listen for the sound of approaching footsteps, praying that Professor Mangle had not caught him out.

Chapter Seven

Johnny sat listening for what seemed like an eternity but in reality had been only ten minutes. No one had come. Perhaps he hadn't been seen after all.

His father's office was laid out much like Mangle's, only quite a bit neater and with fewer books and shelves. On one of the wood-paneled walls hung several photographs, including a large print of the recently completed Duke Chapel, a beautiful gothic edifice patterned after St. Vitus Cathedral in Prague, Czechoslovakia.

Johnny's mind marveled at the incredible engineering needed to craft such an ornate and stately building. It seemed almost impossible.

On another wall hung his father's diplomas:

Undergraduate Degree in English Literature, University of Aberdeen, 1920
Master of Arts Degree in Medieval and Renaissance History, University of Aberdeen, 1921
Ph.D. in History of Theology with a Thesis on Natural and Revealed Religions, University of St. Andrews, 1924

Johnny fidgeted, shifting in his chair, and finally stood and walked across the wood floor to his father's desk. It was strewn with papers, a book or two, a fountain pen, his father's hat lying crown down, and a half-eaten sandwich from what must have been lunch.

Next to the sandwich and partially obscured by the hat was a piece of paper that looked like the one he'd seen in Mangle's office. It had what appeared to be many of the same phrases written on it, though not all of them. The paper rested on an open book. Several phrases and names in the book had been underlined or circled:

Holy relics of the faith
Father Lucian
The tomb of Gamaliel

He turned the book around to read in earnest when a voice startled him.

"John?"

Johnny jumped. "Father! You scared me!"

Harold entered, his face stern. "How did you get here?"

"Oh, uh, the bus—after school!"

Harold's brow furrowed. He glanced down at his desk and then back at Johnny, piercing eyes narrowing. "What are you doing here?"

“I just . . . came to see you.” Johnny walked up to his father. “I need to tell you something.”

Harold took a breath and then nodded. “I need to tell you something, too.” He crossed to the desk, shifted a few papers, and grabbed his hat. “What say we walk to Warner’s Drugstore and talk over a chocolate soda?”

When his father turned, Johnny saw that the book he had been reading when Harold entered was now closed.

Johnny nodded, working up enthusiasm he didn’t feel. “Sure! That’d be great!”

Mr. Warner fairly danced up to the booth where Johnny sat with his father. “And here,” he said melodiously, “we have two Warner-exclusive chocolate sodas. People have traveled the globe for one of these, I want you to know. They’re world famous!” He set them on the table with a flourish.

“Well, Johnny here is a dual citizen, having been born in Scotland, so you can add us to the list of world travelers seeking one,” Harold said. “Though we did only walk a few blocks to get here today.”

Warner laughed louder than the joke warranted. “I am honored to have you both. *Bon appétit*!” he declared, and then he bounced into the back room.

Johnny caught a whiff of an odor he’d never smelled before and wrinkled his nose. The odor was quickly displaced by the wonderful chocolaty smell of the soda. He pulled it in front of him, glanced at his father, and nodded toward Mr. Warner. “Is he always that happy?”

“No,” Harold replied with a frown. He dipped his straw into his glass and took a sip.

Johnny did likewise. It was delicious. “Well, he sure makes a great soda!” He sipped again, this time as slowly as he could without drawing attention to himself. He wanted to enjoy the soda, but he also knew that as soon as it was gone, he’d have to start talking. *Then again,* he thought, *that* is *why I came.*

“What did you want to tell me?” Harold asked, taking the briefest of sips from his soda.

Johnny gulped. “I wanted to talk about the words that Emmy asked you to translate.” He concentrated on his soda glass.

“Yes, I wondered when you’d own up to that.”

Johnny looked up quickly. “You knew I asked her to do it?”

Harold smiled faintly. “I wasn’t born yesterday. Your friend Emmy is bright, but she doesn’t seem the type to be interested in old Scots Gaelic.”

How snobby! thought Johnny, but he said aloud, “Why didn’t you say anything?”

“Because *you* didn’t. I figured you’d come to me when the time was right.” Harold took a sip of his soda, then set it aside. “So . . . since the time is obviously right, that must mean you have more questions that need answering, yes?”

“Um . . . questions?”

Harold looked squarely into his eyes. “About the journal.”

Johnny’s heart began pounding. How did his father do that? He seemed to have a knack for being able to read Johnny’s thoughts. Sometimes Johnny felt that as hard as he may try, there was nothing he could truly hide from his father. Johnny breathed deeply, hoping the air would supply enough oxygen to clear his head. “I’m not sure what you mean,” he said as nonchalantly as possible.

“Don’t lie to me, John. I know you’re still flush with success from your last adventure, but I won’t brook lying from you.” Leaning forward, he added, “You have information about the journal. Do you know where it is?”

There was no escaping the question. Johnny set his soda aside and took a deep breath. “I found it in the trunk Grandpa Jackson gave me.”

Harold leaned back and nodded slowly, suddenly so deep in thought that Johnny could almost see words appear over his father’s head. He knew what was coming next. “What else is in the journal?” Harold asked.

“A lot of entries. Some in Latin and Greek, and some in other languages. You said the ones Emmy gave you were old Scots Gaelic?”

“Correct.”

“I think those were Grandpa Jackson’s entries.”

“You don’t think he wrote them all?”

Johnny shrugged. “I don’t know. Maybe. But it looked like different styles of writing. And different ink.”

Harold didn’t flinch. He simply nodded and said, “I see. Well, if you want, I can take the book and have it translated for you.”

“By Professor Mangle?”

Harold’s eyes narrowed. “Now why would you say that?”

Johnny looked down. In for a penny, in for a pound. “That day when Professor Mangle came to the house . . . I overheard your conversation in your study about the meaning of the phrases.” He didn’t mention that he had also just overheard them talking in Mangle’s office at the university. His father frowned, and Johnny added quickly, “I wasn’t snooping, honest! I just went into the house for something and . . . heard you both talking.”

Harold considered him for a long moment. “I’m not sure Karl is the right man for this job. I know another gentleman who could do it. If you like.”

Johnny felt relieved, though he wasn’t sure why. “I’ll think about it. If that’s okay?”

Harold nodded. “It’s up to you.” Johnny retrieved his soda and took another sip. Then Harold added, “Don’t you want to know what I need to tell you?”

Johnny stopped mid-sip. “It wasn’t that you knew about Emmy and the words?”

“Not just that, no,” Harold responded.

Johnny pushed away his soda again. “Then what?”

“The cloth.”

A chill went down Johnny’s spine. He knew Harold was aware of the existence of the cloth, but he didn’t know how much he knew. He’d have to be very careful.

Harold went on. “If you listened to the conversation between Karl and myself at the house, you must have heard him talk about the cloth.”

“Yes, sir, I did.”

“Well, as you saw *on my desk*—” Harold peered at him over the top of his wire-rim glasses—“I’ve been doing my own research on what Karl said. I found that resource in the university library. My intention was to learn the full history of the story before having this conversation with you. Because if that cloth can be located through the clues in your journal, well, imagine what it might mean.”

Johnny forced himself to remain calm. As far as he could tell, his father didn’t know the cloth may actually be upstairs in their house in the trunk, or about what happened to McDuff and how the cloth may have healed the dog. So what *did* he know? “But, Dad . . . how could a piece of cloth actually *heal* someone?”

Harold’s eyebrows rose. “You didn’t hear that part of our conversation?”

Johnny shook his head. “I went back outside.”

“I don’t know whether to be impressed or annoyed,” Harold muttered. “What’s the good of snooping if you’re not going to hear the entire conversation?”

“I wasn’t—”

Harold held up a hand. “All right. I need to find out more information before I answer your question. And a good place to start . . . would be with that journal.” He adjusted his glasses. “But as I said, it’s up to you.”

Johnny frowned. He didn’t like this idea, but he needed to know what was in the journal, especially why his name was written in it. He regarded his father intensely. “It’s my journal, right?”

“It is.”

“You’ll give it back to me when you’ve looked it over?”

“I will.”

Johnny took a deep breath. “Then . . . okay. But you’ll tell me everything you find out, right?”

“Yes, John,” Harold snapped. “What, you don’t trust me?”

Johnny’s thoughts about the only people in Provenance he could trust flickered through his mind, and he felt a sudden pang of guilt and sadness that his father wasn’t among them. But he couldn’t tell Harold that. What son would tell his father he didn’t trust him—even if he actually didn’t? He forced a grin. “I do. I’m just . . . kind of wound up by all this stuff. In an excited way.”

Harold’s stern expression broke, and he actually smiled. “I understand.”

Johnny slowly pulled his soda back and took one last, long sip. It slurped in the bottom of the glass. He needed a bit of reinforcement for what he was about to ask, which he knew was a sore spot for Harold.

“Dad, why do you think Grandpa wanted me to have the trunk and not you?”

Harold stiffened but replied calmly. “He said . . . he just believed it was what he needed to do.”

“Is it what *you* believed he needed to do?”

Harold folded his hands, rested them on the table, and looked down at them. “I believed I needed to abide by your grandfather’s wishes.”

Johnny nodded.

Harold took a breath, called Mr. Warner, and asked for the check. “On the house,” the old man called back merrily. “For my Scottish friends. May the wind be at your backs,” he declared with a wave of his hand.

“I need to grab my briefcase at the office before we head home,” Harold said as they rose from the table, then added pointedly, “and the book you were snooping through, too.”

Chapter Eight

The walk back to the university campus was unexpectedly pleasant. Harold even had a bounce in his step, as if Mr. Warner's giddiness had rubbed off on him.

Time for refraction. "Dad, you do remember that it's Halloween tonight."

"All Hallows' Eve, you mean," Harold corrected.

"Yeah. And you said I could go to Emmy's party."

"I remember, though I thought maybe now you'd want to stay home instead—to go through the journal."

“Don’t you think we should keep doing normal stuff, though? So people won’t get suspicious?”

“Yes,” Harold mused. “Just in case, I suppose we should go on with business as usual.”

“I was thinking . . . maybe I should go trick-or-treating with the other kids, so as not to draw attention to myself. I mean . . . I’d probably be the only kid in town not going.” Johnny acted as nonchalant as possible.

“You don’t think Fiona will get suspicious about that?”

Tactical mistake! thought Johnny. *I just blew it!* But whether it was because chocolate sodas were Harold’s weakness, or more likely because he was going to get to see the journal, he looked at Johnny and said, “All right, you can go with your friends. But no mischief. Do I make myself clear?”

“Yes, sir!” Johnny instantly agreed, stifling the smile trying desperately to break over his face. *Nonchalant. Stay nonchalant*, he thought.

His father’s expression resumed its usual stern and unbending manner. “And don’t think you pulled one over on me, young man. I know how your mind works.” He paused, then with a twinkle in his eye added, “Because it’s a lot like mine.”

At that, Johnny couldn’t hold the smile back any longer. It beamed on his face.

“Not a bad tactic, that,” his father added, sporting a bit of a smile himself.

A few minutes later, father and son entered Harold’s office. Harold grabbed a folder on his desk containing student reports he had to grade later, the research book, and a few other things and stuffed them into his briefcase. “Let’s get out of here,” he said.

The rotary phone on Harold's desk rang loudly. He grimaced but answered. "Harold Whittaker," he said. A pause. "Oh, yes, hello." He cupped his hand over the receiver. "I'll be just a minute, John. Wait out in the hall."

"Yes, sir." Harold resumed his conversation, and Johnny walked out and gently closed the door behind him.

A voice startled him. "And what do we have here—*Eindringling*? A trespasser?"

Johnny turned to see Professor Mangle walking toward him. "Oh! No, sir. I was just here seeing my dad."

"You're Harold's boy, eh? Johnny, isn't it? I don't know. You don't look much like him. You sure you're not here to steal university secrets?"

Johnny's heart sank. "Um . . . no . . ."

Mangle laughed. "*Ich scherze Sie.* I'm only kidding! Where is your father?"

"He's on the phone."

"Don't look so frightened, young man. I don't bite."

Johnny forced a smile. "You startled me. I thought everyone would have gone home by now."

"This is a university. No matter how many hours a day you work, it's never enough."

Johnny suddenly felt uncomfortable, though he wasn't sure why. Mangle had helped his father get this job. They were old friends, or at least acquaintances. Still, there was something disquieting about the man.

"Are you feeling all right, Johnny?" Mangle inquired.

"Uh, yes, sir. Why?"

"Your arm. It's . . . green."

"Oh! That's a compound I developed. It's part of my costume for Halloween tonight. It'll make me glow."

Mangle's eyes brightened. "Bioluminescence? I'm impressed! The apple doesn't fall far from the tree, does it?"

Johnny grinned feebly, wishing his father would hurry and finish his phone call. Suddenly, for a split second, he saw something in Mangle's eyes. It was only a flicker, but it was unmistakably there. He couldn't attach a word to the expression or even explain what it looked like, only how it made him feel.

Vulnerable.

But as quickly as it came, it was gone again, replaced by cordial joviality. "You know, we don't live that far apart. Of course, no one in Provenance lives very far from anyone else, am I right? I'm on the south side of Granville House. You should come by tonight. We have loads of treats."

Johnny blinked. "You live by the old Granville House?"

"*Ach, ja, ja,* I'm afraid so. That eyesore ruins my view, not to mention my property value."

"Professor Mangle, have you seen a boy hanging around that place? About my age?"

Mangle thought for a second. "My boys are about your age. Well, Paul is anyway. Steve would be a few years older."

"I met them the other day. I didn't know you were their father."

"Oh? Where did you meet them?"

Johnny hesitated. "By the river. I was working on an experiment down there."

Mangle sported a crooked smile. "They didn't mention you by name either, but putting the pieces together, I assume Paul's *versengt* hair and eyebrows were the result of your bioluminescent concoction?"

Johnny blushed lightly. "Uh . . . yeah . . . Sorry about that."

Mangle chuckled. "*Nein,* not at all. The boys liked you. Do please come by our place tonight. We'll load up your bag *mit wunderbar* treats, *und* then you can all venture out together. We're at 236 Custer Avenue, two blocks below Granville House."

The door to the office opened, and Harold stepped out. "Still here, Karl?" he said.

“Just leaving when I ran into your son,” he responded. “I’ll see you tonight then, Johnny?”

He nodded. “Yes, sir.”

“*Fantastisch! Gute nacht!*” he said with a nod, walking down the hallway.

Harold and Johnny walked the opposite way. “What was that about?” Harold asked.

“I met his kids the other day. I just told him I’d go trick-or-treating with them tonight.”

“I see.” Harold hesitated for a few seconds, then added, “John, don’t tell anyone about the journal or the cloth, all right? The fewer people who know about them, the better.”

“How about Fiona?”

“Not even her,” Harold said. Then he frowned. “You haven’t told anyone else about any of this, have you?”

“No, sir. Only you.” At least, Johnny didn’t think anyone else knew. Emmy didn’t ask where the words came from. The one unknown was the person who found McDuff when Johnny had run off to get things to patch up the dog. Whoever that was *might* have seen the cloth. He couldn’t be sure, and he decided not to tell his father until he *was* sure.

“And whatever we learn about the journal, you won’t tell Professor Mangle about it, right?” Johnny asked. He wasn’t sure why he asked; it came out before he knew it.

Harold nodded. “No, as I told you, Karl’s not the man for this job. I have a contact in England—a man well versed in linguistics. I think it would be wise to send the journal to him to translate.”

Johnny came to a full stop. “You want to mail the journal *overseas*?”

“It’ll be perfectly safe. I trust this man. Either we send the journal to him, or he comes here. There’s no other way to get it translated properly.”

Johnny wasn’t sure what to think. What if the journal got lost? Or what if the man his father intended to send it to wasn’t as trustworthy as he thought? And—Johnny hesitated to allow the final question to enter his mind—what if his father had bigger plans than he was admitting? He seemed to be saying all the right things, but his father was skilled in convincing people to do what he wanted. Sometimes it came through clever reasoning; other times, through sheer force. Convincing Johnny to give him the journal felt like a little of both.

Harold pushed open the exit door, and he and Johnny walked outside into the cool, overcast autumn afternoon. They reached the black Ford Victoria Model 18, opened the doors, hopped in, and drove away.

From a distance, peering around the corner of the faculty building, Professor Karl Mangle watched as the sedan puttered down the road.

Chapter Nine

“John Avery! Charlotte Marie!” Fiona called. “Hurry along, you two. The children will be arriving any minute!”

Johnny opened the door to his room as his stepsister, Charlie, raced by him and traipsed down the stairs in her Bible costume. He held back to make a more dramatic entrance, but he could hear the conversation below. Charlie decided she would be Queen Esther this year, though the costume was the same as last year when she was Ruth. “It’s not fair that Johnny gets to go trick-or-treating tonight and I don’t,” she pouted.

Fiona adjusted Charlie's collar. "We've been through this already, child. John Avery is older than you." She paused and then added, "And obviously your father doesn't care about how the celebration of evil will affect his son's heart and mind."

Harold winced. "They're going out for candy; that's all," he said. "And he promised me he wouldn't prank anyone. It's not that different from guising, and we still celebrate that."

"Yes, and dookin' for apples, too. But guising, like we grew up doing in Scotland, has nothing to do with evil, and you know it! We pray together and sing songs and recite poems or jokes. It's special. Here they dress up like witches and goblins and such. How do you suppose the good Lord feels about glorifying those things?"

"Well, our children don't dress up like that. Charlie here is a beautiful little Ruth—"

"Queen Esther, Daddy," she clarified.

"Pardon me, your highness—and by the way, thank you for saving the Jewish people. And John . . . Where is John?"

"Right here," Johnny said, moving majestically down the "Sinai" stairs and entering the room. He wore a mop as a wig, and the mop handle was his staff. He had stuck cotton balls to his face for a beard and wore his father's old, brown bathrobe as his tunic. In his hands were two pieces of wood, painted gray, with the words *Ten Commandments* painted on them.

"You certainly do make an imposing Moses," Fiona bragged.

"Turn off the lights!" Johnny told Charlie. She did, and "oohs" and "ahs" filled the room as he walked around it, moving toward his father.

"You're glowing!" Charlie exclaimed.

"Absolutely radiant," Fiona agreed.

Johnny stopped in front of Harold, his back to Fiona and Charlie. "Dad? Whadaya think?" He pulled the journal from between the commandment boards and passed it, reluctantly, to his father, who took it and slipped it into his coat.

“Luminous,” Harold said with a nod. “Quite enlightening.”

Johnny nodded back and said, “I’m just glad it works. I don’t know how long it’ll last, though. I’d better soak up as much light as I can.” He switched the lights back on. Neither he nor Harold looked at each other.

Charlie moped. “Johnny’s going to get loads of treats and candy, and I’m not going to get anything.”

“I can tell you one thing you will get if you keep that up,” said Harold sternly.

“You can have some of my stuff, Charlie,” Johnny offered.

“And *I’ll* tell you what,” Fiona added, bending down to Charlie’s eye level, “if you be very good, and join in helping me pass out the soul cakes to the kids who come to our door, I *might* take you horseback riding with me tomorrow.”

That got her attention. “Did you buy a horse, Mama?”

“No, dear. But I did meet our neighbors. The woman is very nice. And . . . she has *four* horses! And a couple of donkeys to boot! Her name is Eleanor, and she’s kindly offered that I—and anyone I wish to bring along with me—may ride at any time. Isn’t that grand?”

“Very grand!” Charlie excitedly answered.

“Can I come, too?” Johnny asked. “We haven’t gone riding together in months.”

“No, this is only for me,” Charlie said snippily. “’Cause I can’t go trick-or-treating.”

“Right you are, Charlotte,” Fiona agreed.

Just then, there was a knock on the door.

“*Och*, our first visitor,” Fiona said. “Would you care to do the honors, my girl?”

Charlie ran to the door. Once out of earshot of her, Fiona whispered to Johnny, “Don’t worry, lad. I’ll take you riding next time. But only if you take a slow horse. I canna keep up with you master riders.” She tousled his mop hair, and they all followed Charlie to the door.

Several children waited expectantly on the porch. “Trick or treat!” they yelled in unison.

“Goodness, don’t you all look wonderful!” Fiona gushed. “A pirate, a princess, a clown, and . . . What are you, dear?”

The little girl, no more than five, shyly answered, “A kitty.”

“Oh, of course you are. How silly of me,” Fiona said. “Well, we don’t celebrate Halloween in our house, but fortunately we do celebrate All Hallows’ Eve, the night before All Souls’ Day, when we remember and pray for the souls of the Christian faithful who have passed away and gone to glory.”

The kids just stared at her.

“Oh, and we also hand out these.” At which point, Charlie handed a small, round cake to each of the children.

“Are they cookies?” the pirate boy asked.

“No, lad. They’re soul cakes. They do look a little like cookies, I suppose. And they’re *delicious*.”

The children thanked them and wandered on to the next house.

Johnny looked at the clock. 7:20. He needed to get going to the Mangle house so he could join up with Steve and Paul to do their own trick-or-treating.

He grabbed his staff and a pillowcase to carry his plunder and called for McDuff. The dog lazily responded, taking his merry old time. “We’re going to have to work on your training,” Johnny scolded him. “Come on,” he huffed, walking to the door.

He was about to open it to leave when a heavy hand knocked on the other side. He wondered if it would be Emmy. She always knocked hard. He hadn’t told her he could go out yet; for all she knew, he would just be going to her party later. If she came by to rub it in, she’d have a surprise waiting for her.

Johnny opened the door and found out that the surprise was on him. It wasn’t Emmy on the porch, but a grown man.

“Trick or treat?” the fellow said tentatively. He was black, dressed like a hobo, wearing a tattered old coat and threadbare hat. The gray hair exploding from under the hat was dirty and unkempt. Even his scruffy beard looked the part of the homeless bums down by the railroad tracks. Kids who dressed like hobos had to use coffee grounds. This guy looked like the real deal.

Fiona and Harold walked up behind Johnny. “May I help you?” Fiona asked.

“I saw you giving out food to the kids. I wondered if you might have any left for a fella down on his luck,” the man asked, hat now in hand.

“You mean you’re a *real* hobo?” Johnny queried. “You’re not just trick-or-treating?”

The man lowered his gaze. “That’s right.”

Harold frowned. “John, you should get going.”

Johnny noticed the look on his father’s face. “Oh! Uh, right. Uh, sorry, mister. I didn’t mean anything by it.”

“No reason to be sorry, boy. You couldn’t know,” the man said. Then with a curious, trilling sort of laugh, he added, “On a night like this, nothin’ seems real.”

Johnny walked out the door and past the man. As he stepped off the porch, he heard Fiona invite the hobo inside. “I’ll make up a plate for you, Mr.—?”

“Just call me Clarence, ma’am,” he said as the door closed behind him.

It was a glorious night, perfect for trick-or-treating, or so Johnny imagined. A huge moon in a clear sky lit up the ground, and the air was crisp and cool. Johnny crossed the street to Emmy’s house and rapped on the door. Emmy opened it. Her hair was in pigtails, as she often wore it, and she sported a blue-and-white gingham dress. She had a picnic basket in her hand and pointed silver shoes on her feet.

“Trick or treat, Dorothy,” Johnny said.

Emmy giggled. “Welcome to Kansas, Moses,” she replied. “Oh, and you brought Toto, too!” She bent down to pet McDuff’s head. “Don’t worry. I’ll protect you from the wicked witch.”

McDuff yawned and scratched.

“You look great,” Johnny stated. “Just like I imagined Dorothy from the book.”

“Thanks. I’d like to say you look like the Moses I imagined, but to be honest, you kind of look like a cross between a clown and a frog.”

Johnny scowled. “I wasn’t counting on the green tint showing up in the dark,” he admitted. “But it could be how Moses really looked. Who’s to say?”

Emmy wrinkled her nose. “One thing’s for sure. I’m not gonna nickname you Moses.” She paused, then smugly added, “Personally, I still like ‘Whit.’”

Johnny rolled his eyes. “Keep trying,” he said.

“So, what are you doing here anyway?” Emmy asked. “The party isn’t until nine.”

Johnny smiled broadly through his cotton beard. “You won’t believe this, but my dad said I can trick-or-treat tonight!”

“What? You’re kidding! How did you pull that off?”

“Refraction!”

She looked confused.

“You don’t remember?” he asked. “The conversation you and I had this morning? You asked me how to make something solid look as if it were bent.”

Emmy nodded. “Oh! And you said something about bending light through a prism or something.”

“Right. So I took your advice. We were talking about the phrases you asked him to translate—”

“You mean the ones you *told* me to ask him to translate.”

Johnny shrugged, “Yeah. Anyway, I admitted that they were from me, and of course he already knew, because he knows everything. *But* . . . that led into a bigger discussion about other, more important

things—”

“What things?”

“Don’t interrupt. *So* . . . when I asked him about trick-or-treating, my father, the unbendable object, appeared to actually bend when he saw that tonight was just a small thing compared to the big thing that bent his . . . well . . . light. Refraction! Great idea, Emmy!”

She stared at him blankly. “What in the world are you talking about?”

Johnny sighed and then laughed. “Nothing! Let’s go trick-or-treating before Fiona changes my dad’s mind!”

Chapter Ten

Johnny and Emmy stopped at a few houses on the way to Professor Mangle's, where they would join forces with Steve and Paul. The first house handed out apples, drawing a frown from Emmy.

"Problem?" he asked as they walked away.

"Yeah!" she replied with a scowl. "The whole point of trick-or-treating is to get *candy*, not fruit!"

"Then you probably wanna stay away from my place," Johnny joked.

The next two houses were better. The first gave them each a few pieces of taffy, and the second handed out peppermint sticks. There were more homes where they could have stopped, but Johnny felt they had gotten a late start and hurried them along toward the Mangle house instead.

“So who are these boys, anyway?” Emmy asked as they hiked past the Granville House grounds, weaving through an assortment of costumed pirates, ghosts, a few Charlie Chaplin Little Tramps, and one kid dressed like King Kong.

“Some fellas I met in the woods a few days back,” Johnny replied. “Steve and his younger brother, Paul. They’re really nice.” He stopped them suddenly and turned to her. “Uh, I should warn you, though, Steve is in a wheelchair.”

“Why?”

“He has some illness. I don’t know what it is. So we may have to help push him around.”

Emmy nodded. “That’s okay.”

A short while later, they arrived at the Mangle home, a tan American Foursquare–style home with dormer windows and a small porch about two blocks from the fence line of Granville House. In fact, it was just down the street from the break in the fence where Milo Knox had parked his car when he kidnapped them, after they had told him about the location of the Confederate gold. Rosebushes lined the front of the house, their blooms all spent for the year. A porch swing swayed lazily in a gentle evening breeze.

A ramp covered the steps, and Johnny and Emmy walked up it to the front door. Several moths flitted about the porch light, unconcerned by their presence.

Johnny tapped the door knocker twice, and within a few seconds the front door opened. A woman of slight build stood on the other side. Her red hair was elaborately coiffed, and she wore a gray, floral-patterned dress and high heels and was smoking a cigarette. Benny Goodman played in the background on the radio.

“Aren’t you going to say it?” the woman asked hoarsely.

Johnny wasn’t sure what she meant. “Ma’am?”

“I believe ‘trick or treat’ is the usual phrase,” she clarified.

“Oh, actually we’re looking for Steve and Paul. I’m John Whittaker, and this is Emmy Capello. Professor Mangle said I should stop by and we could all trick-or-treat together.”

“I see,” she said. “My husband did say something about that. Wait a moment, please.” She turned and called for the boys, who hollered back that they were just about ready.

Johnny and Emmy stood outside awkwardly. Mrs. Mangle turned back and studied him, taking a puff of the cigarette. She looked at him so long without saying anything that he began to feel uncomfortable. Finally, she exhaled a small cloud of smoke and said, “You appear to be glowing. Are you supposed to be a clown?”

“No, ma’am. Moses. Coming down from the mountain.”

She looked confused.

“The Bible says he was radiant—glowing.”

“Oh.” She turned to Emmy. “And how about you, young lady?” the woman asked Emmy.

“I’m Dorothy from *The Wizard of Oz*. And . . . where’s Mc—uh, Toto?” she asked Johnny.

“Sniffing around in the trees.”

Another awkward pause hung in the air until Johnny finally remembered something. “Ma’am, Professor Mangle promised to load our pillowcases up when we came by.” He smiled hopefully and held out his pillowcase, elbowing Emmy in the process. She quickly held out hers as well.

The woman scowled at them. “Oh, he did, did he? Well, he’s not here at the moment, so the normal dole will have to do.” She dropped one piece of hard candy into each mostly empty pillowcase.

Emmy looked in her case, sneered, and was just about to say something when Johnny cut her off. “Thank you, ma’am.” Emmy glared at him, and he frowned at her and jerked his head toward the

woman. “Yes,” Emmy said oh-so-sweetly, “Thank you *ever* so much.”

Finally, Paul and Steve arrived at the door, Paul pushing Steve in the wheelchair. Paul was dressed in cowboy gear, complete with hat, vest, chaps, and bandana. His six-shooters were at his side, and a tin star adorned his vest. The only thing betraying his costume were the Keds sneakers on his feet—and the fact that he’d had to use a marker to draw eyebrows back on his face. He also used it to draw a mustache on his upper lip. Johnny gave Steve the once-over and said, “Where’s your costume?”

“I’ve got it on!” Steve insisted. “Can’t ya tell? I’m Clark Gable—so handsome I make the women swoooon.” He grinned mischievously.

Johnny chortled.

“More like the Cheshire Cat from *Alice in Wonderland*,” Emmy scoffed.

“She’s gonna fit right in,” said Steve.

Johnny introduced Emmy to the boys, and then, after promises to Mrs. Mangle that they would be home before it got too late, the group departed.

They quickly made their way back into the more populated section of town, which wasn’t much more crowded. Provenance consisted of a drugstore; a small grocery store; a church; a post office; a barber who also served as an emergency dentist; a diner; a one-man newspaper, *The Provenance Standard*; the town hall; a public library; a sheriff station with two deputies (one part-time); Brookhaven Public School; and about 970 residents in town, with several hundred more living in the surrounding hills, farms, and forests.

In some respect, the area hadn’t recovered fully from the Civil War. Now, adding to the problem, many businesses had failed since the beginning of the Great Depression, resulting in multiple families migrating to what they hoped would be greener pastures. Those who stayed had found work in one of the factories or mills in Durham or

Raleigh—or had tried to. But that too was short-lived. Many of the larger businesses had shut their doors in the years that had followed as well.

That being the case, it didn't take a great deal of time to canvas most of the residences in town. Fully half the houses were unlit, a signal that those within either didn't observe the holiday or couldn't pay their utility bill, which meant they also couldn't afford any treats. Either way, the rambunctious kids of the area were happy, for those who welcomed the costumed peddlers supplied them with treats, and those who didn't would awaken tomorrow to discover that their windows had been egged or soaped over.

Johnny didn't observe that tradition. He had promised his father he wouldn't cause mischief. He also didn't want to get into trouble and draw more attention to himself. Steve and Paul, on the other hand, brought six eggs and a bar of soap along with them. Steve couldn't actually carry out the "tricks"—he didn't have enough strength—but Paul did. He also had a good arm.

As they rounded onto Hyde Street, they almost literally ran into Wilson Knox and Arty Moore, Johnny and Emmy's nemeses in the Confederate gold mystery. Both Wilson and Arty were obnoxious bullies before the conclusion of the mystery took them down a notch or two. But now that Johnny and Emmy's celebrity was starting to fade, Wilson and Arty were slowly returning to their old selves. Both were bigger than Johnny, but they were wary of him since they knew he was proficient in karate and had taught Emmy a few moves as well. That didn't stop their mouths from flapping, however.

"Well, look who it is," said Wilson, "Sherlock the hero and his sidekick, Watkins!"

"Yeah, Watkins!" Arty echoed.

"That's 'Watson,' you dunce," Emmy said with a scowl.

Arty frowned, but Wilson chuckled. "Like it matters," Wilson replied. "So what are you supposed to be, Whittaker, a giant, furry, glowing pickle?"

Arty roared, “Pickle!”

Johnny sighed and said, “No, I’m Moses, when he came down from the mountain after receiving the Ten Commandments.”

“Oh, yeah!” Wilson nodded, smirking, “’cause he was supposed to be radiant, right?”

Johnny and Emmy looked at each other, blinked, and then looked back at Wilson. “You *got* that?” asked Emmy.

“You know the *Bible*?” asked Johnny.

“Course I did, and course I do!” he said indignantly to each of them in turn. “Well, some of it at least.”

Emmy shook her head. “Well, I have to say, you certainly are full of surprises, Wilson.”

“Oh, Wilson Knox is a lot deeper than you could possibly know,” he said, cocking his head to one side flirtatiously, a simper curling his lips.

Emmy suddenly looked very uncomfortable, as if she had just bitten into something really bitter. Johnny thought he might really turn green . . . from nausea.

“Hey, now,” Arty said, “*this* kid’s got the right idea!” He pushed past Emmy and blocked Steve’s wheelchair. “Dressin’ up like a cripple, you probably took in a big haul! Lessee!” He grabbed Steve’s pillowcase off his lap and peered inside.

“Hey!” Steve yelped.

Paul gulped and stepped back.

Johnny sprang forward. “Give it back, Arty!” he demanded.

“Easy now! I jist wanted to see whether your friend here got any good stuff!” He jostled the sack. “Sure feels hefty!”

“*Now*, Arty!”

“Okay, okay!” The bruiser smirked and tossed the bag back on Steve’s lap. “I’m gonna try your outfit next year, kid!”

“It’s not an outfit, you pinhead!” Emmy exclaimed.

Arty looked at each of their faces, confused. “You mean he’s really—?” He stopped, swallowed hard, and turned back to Steve. “I didn’t mean nuthin’—”

“Just *go*!” Johnny barked, jaw clenched.

Wilson grabbed Arty’s arm. “C’mon, let’s get outta here,” Wilson urged. He pulled Arty away, and they both walked down the street.

Emmy shook with rage. Johnny turned to Steve, concerned. “Don’t pay him any mind,” Johnny said. “He tries to act big by making others feel small.”

Steve shrugged, waving it off. “It’s no big deal. You gotta admit, I do have more candy than the rest of you. Works every year.” He smiled, but Johnny could see sadness in his eyes. “They’re a coupla charmers, aren’t they?” Steve added.

“Wilson Knox is a wet sock,” Emmy said. “And that Arty! What a muttonhead! Those two make me so angry!”

“The bigger one seemed kinda sweet on you,” said Steve with a grin.

Emmy spun on him. “*What?* Don’t make me puke!”

Steve laughed, Johnny snickered, and even Paul grinned. A smile slowly broke across Emmy’s face. Soon they were all laughing as they moved down the block toward the next row of houses.

When their laughter subsided, Steve looked at Johnny and Emmy and said, “So, you gonna ask me?”

“Ask you what?” said Johnny.

“Why I can’t walk.”

Johnny and Emmy exchanged glances, and Johnny shrugged.

“Oh, come on,” Steve said, “I know you want to.”

“So . . . why can’t you walk?” Emmy asked softly.

“I’ve never walked.”

Emmy’s jaw dropped. “*Never?* Not even as a baby?”

Paul chimed in. “That’s how they found out what he has.”

“What *do* you have?” Johnny asked.

“Muscular dystrophy,” Steve answered evenly, tossing a piece of candy corn in his mouth.

“I’ve never even heard of it,” Emmy said, leaning back. “Is it a disease?”

“I’m not contagious, if that’s what you’re worried about,” Steve said.

“I’m not worried at all,” Emmy said.

Steve looked at her skeptically, then smiled. “You two are the only ones in town who haven’t avoided me or who only want to know about what’s wrong with me and if it’s catching. That’s one reason I took to you when we met down at the river,” he said to Johnny. “You didn’t bring it up at all.”

“To be honest, it never crossed my mind,” Johnny said.

They walked by one dark house, then another.

“I really didn’t think you were,” Emmy said in a small voice. “Contagious, I mean. I just wondered whether the doctors could cure it.”

Steve searched for a different confection and pulled out a stick of Black Jack gum, which he unwrapped and popped in his mouth. “I better eat as much of this as I can before I get home. My mom’ll only let us have a few pieces a day,” he said, chewing.

“There’s no cure,” Steve finally answered. “My muscles will just get weaker and weaker. I’ll have more trouble breathing and—if some other sickness like pneumonia doesn’t take me—my heart will eventually . . . give out.”

No one said anything for a long moment. Steve reached back into his sack and fished out another stick of Black Jack. “Gum?” he offered.

“But why?” Emmy asked.

“’Cause it’s a good chew!”

“No! I mean why are your heart and lungs affected by the disease?”

“Your lungs and heart are muscles, too, Emmy,” Johnny said quietly. Emmy took the gum Steve held up, unwrapped it, placed it in her mouth, and started chewing. They all walked on in silence. Johnny certainly didn’t know what to say that Steve probably hadn’t heard a million times before.

By the time they made the circuit and rounded onto Brewster Lane, everyone’s pillowcase was about half-full. They would have been even fuller, but all four of them had eaten enough to make their stomachs more than a little queasy.

They headed back toward Steve and Paul’s home, past the water tower and the old Granville place. Johnny observed the water tower that had played such an important role during his first few weeks in town. It was dark, but when he looked hard, he could just make out his unfinished experiment to reenergize an old car battery via lightning—the wires still dangled from the top of the tower. He still thought it was an idea worth pursuing, but he certainly didn’t want to deal with his father’s ire again.

According to Deputy Miller, who had helped him off the tower, the old Granville House and the property next to the tower had been abandoned for years. The grounds were thick with overgrown vegetation and old statuary and surrounded by a concrete and wrought iron fence. Though set back a ways from the road, the house itself was still visible from the street, a looming, imposing structure with dozens of broken windows and in desperate need of a new coat of paint.

Part of the mystery of the Confederate gold took place on those grounds, and though the closest Johnny had gotten to the house was a nest of trees called Lover’s Circle, he loved the architecture of the place, from its multiple spires to its ornate gables and eaves hanging over the wraparound porch. It seemed like a building you could explore inside forever and always find a new surprise.

Then he saw it. It was brief, but unmistakably there.

A light. Inside, on what must be the third floor. He saw it flicker through the dormer window. A candle? A small flashlight?

“Did you guys see that?” he asked.

Emmy had. “Yeah! Some kids must be goofing off in there! Probably Wilson and Arty.”

Johnny shook his head. “After what happened to Arty last time, I doubt he’ll ever come back here.”

“Why? What happened?” asked Paul.

“It’s not important,” Johnny answered.

A big grin broke across Steve’s face. “Let’s sneak up there and scare ’em!”

“Dad told us to play out of that stace,” Paul admonished, pushing the wheelchair a bit faster as though trying to break the invisible gravitational pull of the temptation.

“Hold it!” Steve commanded. The wheelchair came to a halt. “Dad doesn’t want us exploring in there ’cause he has no imagination. But it’s perfect! Johnny, if you pulled that mop off your head and lost the Ten Commandments, you’d be a textbook ghost! We could scare the pants off of ’em!”

It took a bit of convincing, but the kids agreed to go along with the prank. Only McDuff refused. No matter how much they coaxed, he stayed put.

“He’s the only one of us with any sense,” said Emmy.

They left the pup behind and made their way to the house as deftly as possible. Johnny removed his hair mop, set down his staff and tablets at the front gate, and they crept to the porch of the mansion. Johnny began to mount the stairs when Steve urgently whispered, “Wait!”

Johnny stopped. “What?”

“I’m coming too! It was my idea. Besides, I can make bat sounds with my cheeks!” He demonstrated, fluttering his jowls rapidly.

Everybody stifled a laugh, though Emmy snorted.

“That’s great!” Johnny whispered. “Paul, grab one side of the wheelchair while I get the other. Emmy, steady the back!”

Paul lamented softly, “Oooo, I’m gonna get in mo such trouble for this.”

On a count of three they lifted, and within seconds they were all on the porch. Emmy pushed Steve, and Paul let her. “At least I can deny that much,” he muttered.

They paused at the door. Steve gave everyone their instructions: “Johnny, walk really slow and wave your arms around like you’re a little crazy. Paul, moan and ‘oooooh’ and stuff. That always sounds spooky. Emmy, when I nod at you, let out a big scream. I’ll do the bat sound effects.” He paused, a wide grin covering his face. “Ready?” They all nodded, except Paul.

Emmy nudged him. “What’s wrong? You scared?”

“Not of the house,” Paul moaned. “Of my parents! They don’t have the heart to punish Steve, so they give me an extra dose.” He rubbed the seat of his pants. “I can almost feel it already.”

“Well, if you’re already feeling the punishment, you might as well do the crime,” Johnny quipped.

Steve snickered. “You’re my kind of guy,” he said. “Lead on!”

Johnny nodded and grabbed the handle on the door. He and his companions walked through it into the dark, ramshackle house, unaware of the adventure awaiting them.

Chapter Eleven

Inside, the house was cloaked in darkness. Even the light of the gibbous moon refused to enter. The only illumination came from the dimming light of the waving ghost of John Avery Whittaker.

Johnny's squinting eyes could make out a few things: old posters from foreign lands on the walls; a broken-down Victrola; a framed piece of needlepoint reading, "All you can take with you is that which was given away"; and a tattered copy of *Tom Sawyer* on the floor.

Paul's haunting moans, along with Steve's cheeky bat flaps, echoed off the walls and down the halls, creating a melodramatic atmosphere. Johnny had no idea how a ghost should walk. He assumed that if there were such things as ghosts, they wouldn't *have* to walk, but he nevertheless did his best imitation.

It all came to nothing. If somebody actually had shone a light in the house, he or she had either already left or was unimpressed with the kids' dramatic presentation.

Steve whispered, "Johnny? Go haunt the upstairs. That's where you saw the light, right?"

The idea countered Johnny's better judgment, but he nodded and slowly shuffled toward the staircase. At the landing, he grabbed the banister and began walking up. At his first step, his waving arm bumped the newel post cap, knocking it off its perch. He deftly snagged it before it clattered to the floor.

Johnny looked back at the others. Emmy's hand covered her gaping mouth, and Paul looked as if he might pass out, but Steve shook with silent laughter, his wheelchair swaying softly. Johnny regrouped and slowly walked up the long flight of stairs, each foot soliciting a creak or groan.

Paul resumed his moaning, which may have come more from his own fear instead of any acting prowess, and Steve added his bat flaps in dramatic intervals. Johnny braced himself for Emmy's scream and continued climbing.

He topped the stairs and, as ghostly as he could, wandered down the second-story hall. By the time he reached the end, he had seen no one and nothing except some scattered trash—empty cans, burlap bags, shattered glass, and the like—and the springs of an old wrought iron bed.

Another, narrower staircase led up to a third floor, where the dormer window had framed the flickering light. Johnny set his foot on the first step, when he heard a loud crash from below, accentuated

by Emmy's piercing scream. But that scream was not a contrived one. Something had happened.

Johnny raced back through the hall and flew down the stairs to his friends.

Hitting the bottom step, he looked for the others. Some very authentic groaning came from the adjoining room. He hurried into it.

"Where are you guys?" Johnny called in a frantic whisper.

"We're here," Emmy responded.

Johnny moved toward her voice.

"Ook lout!" Paul shouted.

But it was too late. Johnny walked straight into a gaping hole in the floorboards, falling into the crawl space below. He landed on something soft. Emmy screamed again, only this time, it sounded more like a bark of pain.

Through his almost extinguished glow, Johnny saw the others who broke through the floor lying beside him. Steve had somehow remained in his wheelchair. Paul stretched out beside his brother, his eyes wide as saucers.

The soft thing Johnny landed on was Emmy. "You wanna get off me?" she groaned. "You're heavier than you look."

"Oh! Sorry," Johnny said, crawling beside Steve. "Are you guys okay? Is anyone hurt?"

"I'm fine," Steve answered. "Good thing I didn't fall out of this wheelchair."

"Oh no," Paul groaned.

"What's wrong?" Johnny asked. "Are you all right?"

"No. My pillowcase ripped. My candy spilled everywhere."

"Well, I'm not sharing mine with you!" Steve informed him. "Losers weepers."

"Can we please go now?" Paul asked.

"How are we going to get Steve up?" Emmy asked.

“It’s only about four feet,” Johnny noted. “Paul, you climb up topside. We’ll have to lift Steve out first, and then get the wheelchair out after.”

It took about five minutes, but they managed to hoist Steve up to Paul, who slid him across the floor to rest against the wall. Then Johnny and Emmy grabbed the chair to hand it up.

It had gotten wedged between the floorboards and something they couldn’t see behind it. Shaking it back and forth, they eventually dislodged it and handed it up to Paul, who kept mumbling over and over, “Dad’s gonna kill us.”

Steve disagreed. “Nah, he’ll just kill you. Like you said before, he never punishes me.”

Emmy grabbed a board to pull herself up, but felt a sharp sting. “Ow!” she yelled.

“What now?!” Paul asked.

“I cut my hand on something,” Emmy replied. “I’m bleeding.”

“You okay?” Johnny asked.

Emmy scowled. “I’m fine.” She pulled a bow from her hair and wrapped it around the cut. “Did you see anything upstairs?”

Johnny shook his head. “Not really. Just some trash. I never made it to the third floor.”

“The scream?”

“Yeah.”

“I am a great screamer.” She finished wrapping her wound.

“I’ll give you a leg up,” Johnny said.

“Wait a minute . . . my trick-or-treat bag must have fallen in here somewhere.”

“You don’t wanna lose that,” Steve hollered as Paul helped him into his wheelchair. “I’m not sharing my stash with anyone.”

Johnny got down on all fours to look for it. Emmy did the same. Johnny thought he could see it behind a few remaining boards. The glow formula had lasted longer than he expected, which was a

mercy in their current situation. He moved closer and tossed aside the boards where the wheelchair had gotten caught.

“Found it!” he said, pulling it out. A few remaining boards fell, but before Johnny could react, Emmy screamed again.

“Would you stop that?” Johnny snapped. “You’re going to give me a heart attack!” Then he saw the look of horror etched on her face.

Emmy’s bloody left hand covered her mouth. Her right hand pointed at something. Her eyes were wide with terror as she stammered, “C-c-off-in!”

Johnny turned. Emmy was right. Directly behind him was a coffin. The end was busted open, likely from the fall of the wheelchair hitting it. And through the eerie green glow of his body, he could see something sticking out from it.

The bottom of a woman’s boot.

It would normally take about fifteen minutes to get from Granville House to Johnny and Emmy’s homes.

They made it in eight.

And one of those minutes was spent in front of Steve and Paul’s house, arguing over whether they should tell their parents. Johnny thought they should. The others disagreed. McDuff, who caught up with them, whined.

“If my parents knew I was in that place, they’d tan Paul’s hide,” Steve argued.

Paul echoed his brother’s assessment.

Emmy surprised Johnny, saying it didn’t matter anyway. That coffin had probably been down there for years. Besides, they didn’t really know whether a body was inside.

“You saw the boot,” Johnny countered.

“Yes, a boot, but no foot.”

“Maybe the person who killed her cut off her legs and fed them to alligators,” Steve suggested.

Johnny shook his head. “Okay. We won’t tell anyone. I never want to see that thing again.”

Emmy was surprised. “What? We have to go back,” she protested. “We have to find out what’s *inside* that coffin.”

Johnny didn’t want to admit it to his friends, especially on Halloween, but since the day he saw his mother lying in a coffin, he’d had a dire fear of them. An almost irrational fear. In fact, when he saw the coffin in the crawl space, he had leapt out of the hole and raced out of the building quicker than anyone. Fortunately, no one had chided him about it. It had spooked them all pretty badly.

“I don’t care what you say. I don’t have to see what’s inside any coffin!” Paul said boldly. “I mean, come on. The only thing ever in them is a bed doddy.”

“Dead body,” Steve corrected.

“We don’t know that there’s one in that coffin,” Emmy said. “It could be more Confederate treasure.”

“Didn’t look like treasure to me,” Johnny said.

“I agree!” Paul said. “I say no!”

Steve laughed. “You two are worse than a girl.”

“*Excuse* me?” Emmy said defensively. “I’ve been saying we should go back!”

“Right,” Steve said. “Those two are worse than a girl.”

Johnny could tell that Emmy was put out at the comment, but she held her tongue. He decided to chime in before she changed her mind. “Fine,” he said, “we’ll go.”

Paul frowned. “I haven’t agreed yet,” he insisted.

“Yes, you have,” Steve said. “Whether you like it or not.”

“It’s gonna end in tears,” Paul moaned. “Mine.”

Tomorrow was Wednesday, a school day, which meant that Saturday would be their first opportunity to return. They agreed they would sneak back and look inside the coffin Saturday night, after

their parents had gone to bed. Paul and Steve raced inside their home, while Johnny and Emmy sped toward Magnolia Lane.

After what they'd just seen, neither Emmy nor Johnny was in the mood to attend a Halloween party. But since Emmy's family was putting it on, they had no choice.

They dropped McDuff back at Johnny's house and then went straight to Emmy's party. Dozens of people were already there, kids and adults. Johnny knew a few of them and tried to participate, but his heart was still pounding.

After bobbing for an apple and coming up with a pear, Johnny ducked into a side room to get away from the crowd. He wondered how long that coffin had been there. And why of all places would it even *be* there? The image of it reappearing in his mind made his skin crawl. He imagined his mother inside that coffin. His heart sank.

He began to explore every possibility. Perhaps someone had been murdered and hidden away. Perhaps the person hadn't been murdered at all but had died tragically, and the people left behind couldn't bear the thought of being separated from their loved one. Perhaps what lay inside wasn't a body at all. Perhaps, as Emmy had suggested, it was more treasure.

And then, of course, it might simply be an empty coffin, and the boot had been in the crawl space beside it.

Johnny grabbed for something to eat from his pillowcase. He felt through the candy in search of a cookie or an apple. His hand fell on a piece of paper, folded into quarters. Curious, he retrieved it from the bag and opened it. He recognized the handwriting instantly.

> *I saw yew and the other boys by the river doing something by a fire. After yew all left, a man came from outta nowere. He talked to himself, saying how angry he was that yew had been there. He said that now he'd have to burry someone named Rakia somewheres else.*

Johnny swallowed hard. When he read the final line, he got up, bolted for the back door, and lit out for home.

The line said: *I saw that same man at yer howse tonite asking fer food. Beware.*

Chapter Twelve

Johnny rushed to the house, hoping against hope that nothing bad had happened. Jumbled thoughts raced through his mind. He knew the note was from the mysterious boy he had seen when setting up his lightning-capture experiment on the water tower when he first came to town. The handwriting on this note was exactly the same as on the note the boy had written then, helping Johnny solve the Confederate gold mystery.

He still hadn't met the boy and didn't know who he was. Johnny had bumped into dozens of kids tonight on the street trick-or-treating, and it could have been any one of them. Who was this boy? Why didn't he introduce himself? Why was he being so mysterious?

Johnny stopped when he got to his porch. *Maybe the man is still in the house,* he thought. That forced him to calm down. He couldn't help his family if he rushed in and was caught himself.

He moved to the bay window and peered into the living room. It was deserted, with no signs of a struggle, just a lamp turned on low. He went back to the front door, inched it open, and slipped inside. He made his way carefully to the kitchen. Also empty. Everything was put away neat and clean. Johnny's heart quickened. *Did the man kidnap them? Did he hurt them? Or worse?*

Then he heard it: a sort of scratching and scraping sound coming from down the hallway. He saw the door to the inner sanctum—his father's study—was open, and a dull light from within it spilled out onto the hallway floor.

Johnny swallowed hard and crept down the hall toward the study. The scraping and scratching got louder, and he imagined all sorts of awful things that might be making that sound: Fiona scratching the word *hobo* into the floorboard before breathing her last; McDuff scratching on the side of a coffin his family members were imprisoned in. The gruesome possibilities seemed endless.

His hands felt clammy, and he began to sweat, causing his bioluminescence potion to smear and run into his eyes. He wiped them, shook his head to clear his thoughts, and tiptoed closer to the study door. He stopped just outside it—the scratching and scraping louder now—braced himself against the wall, and craned his neck to look around the corner.

"I wondered when you'd get home," a voice said.

It was his father. He sat at his desk, hunched over the ancient journal, scrawling some notes on a pad of paper with his fountain pen.

Johnny exhaled and rushed inside. “Where are Fiona and Charlie?” he asked.

“In bed, of course. A lot of kids came by tonight. They were exhausted.”

Harold discreetly slid a folder over the pad he’d been writing on. Johnny noticed, but he was so relieved that he didn’t care at the moment. He collapsed into the leather guest chair. His father looked at him curiously. “What’s the matter?” he asked. “You look like you’ve seen a ghost.”

“Dad, before I left there was a hobo at the door asking for food,” Johnny said.

“Yes, I was there. I remember. I also remember that you embarrassed him.”

“The thing is, when I was trick-or-treating, somebody put this note in my bag.” He handed the note to Harold, who read it and handed it back.

“Poor spelling.”

“Dad!”

“Don’t tell me you actually fell for this. I thought you had more sense. It’s obviously a Halloween joke.”

Johnny knew he had good reason to trust the note, because he was pretty sure who wrote it, but he decided not to reveal that to his father. “Why is it obvious? He could have been dangerous.”

Harold sighed impatiently. “First off, the gentleman was very nice. Second, I’m disappointed in you, John. To accuse a man because he’s having a rough time financially is terribly prejudiced.”

“I didn’t accuse him. I was just worried because of the note!”

“Well, he wasn’t dangerous, and he was very grateful for the food. He even offered to work for it. So toss that note into the trash. Paying heed to rumors and slander is a poor use of the mind God gave you.”

Johnny scowled but didn't press the issue any further. He also didn't toss the note but put it in his pocket when Harold looked back at the journal. His father appeared to be out of sorts, which was nothing new, since Harold was often irritable. But he seemed even more so tonight. A change of subject was in order.

"Find anything interesting?" he asked, nodding toward the journal.

"Not really," Harold sighed. "I can't read most of the languages."

"Not even Latin and Greek?"

"I can read those, but they don't say anything much more than we already know: 'pearl of great price' and 'long life.' There must be seven or eight other languages and dialects in here, and I don't recognize any of them."

"You haven't figured *anything* out?" Johnny asked.

Harold pulled off his glasses and wiped his eyes. "No, I'm afraid not," he said. "But I spoke to my contact overseas about the journal. He was excited about translating it. I'll mail it off tomorrow."

Johnny frowned and nodded.

"He promised to be cautious and to return it to us as quickly as possible."

To us*?* Johnny thought. *You mean, to* me*. It's* my *journal.* But aloud he only said, "All right."

Harold's brow furrowed. "Something wrong?"

"No," Johnny answered. "I'm tired."

"Too much candy," Harold surmised. He put his glasses back on. "Well, you'd better get to bed, then. It's school tomorrow, and morning comes early." He bent back over the journal.

Johnny considered telling his father about finding the coffin at Granville House but decided, given the state of his father's mood, to ask a more generic question, the one that had been nagging him since he walked into the room: "What were you writing?"

Harold didn't look up. "Just a few notes," Harold replied, still looking down.

“About the journal?”

“Yes, research ideas.”

“May I see them?”

Harold looked up. “Not yet. They’re not ready.”

“But you said you’d share your findings with me—”

“And I will, John,” Harold said firmly. “But *not yet*. When I want you to see them, I’ll show them to you.”

Johnny glowered at him, and Harold glowered right back. He waited for a few seconds and then commanded, “To bed.” He then raised his eyebrows and added, *“Now.”*

The eyebrows communicated a lot. Whenever they arched up like that, his father had drawn his line in the sand. The conversation was over.

Johnny rose, sullen, and said, “Yes, sir.” He turned, headed for the door, and paused there, looking back. His father was still glaring at him. Johnny took a breath and exited the room.

Johnny didn’t sleep at all that night. His mind was too jumbled with thoughts, alternating between the discovery of the coffin at Granville House, the mysterious boy who kept writing him notes, and the nagging feeling that his father had figured out something from the journal and had decided to keep it to himself.

The only thing Johnny came to a conclusion about was that he would not even entertain the *notion* of telling his father that the cloth the journal referred to had been in his wooden trunk the whole time. He believed strongly that if his father found that out, he would take the cloth from him and send it away for testing as well. Johnny wouldn’t risk that.

Lying in bed, the minutes and hours ticking down the night and its darkness, Johnny had the nagging feeling that his life teetered on the verge of huge changes. He had no idea exactly what that meant

or whether he'd like the outcome. The last time he felt so unsettled was right before his Grandpa Jackson died and his family moved from Scotland to America, and he hoped this time the changes would be happier ones.

The next morning, after a breakfast of scrambled eggs, toast, and applesauce, during which Charlie asked such silly questions as, "Why is cooked bread called toast?" and "Why do people eat fried eggs for breakfast but not fried chicken?" Johnny quietly escaped out the front door and off to school.

When he was clear of the house, he took out the note the boy had written and slipped in his candy bag the previous night. In spite of his father's lack of concern, the note troubled him. It could have been a prank, but he didn't think so. The boy had obviously been watching his home last night, and Johnny at the river the other day. So why didn't he come out and introduce himself? Why all the secrecy? Might it have something to do with the cloth? After all, the day Johnny unintentionally stabbed McDuff, somebody had neatly folded the cloth while Johnny went for help. Could it have been the boy?

Johnny was half a block down the road when he realized he'd forgotten to wait for Emmy. It didn't matter; when he turned around, he saw her running toward him. He silently groaned, wishing he had gotten away. His father's mood had rubbed off on him, and he didn't want to talk to anyone. Still, maybe she would have some thoughts on the boy and the note. He held it up as she approached.

However, it seemed Emmy was also not in the best of moods. When she got up to him she barked, "Where did you disappear to last night?"

Johnny was taken aback by her tone, but he shrugged as if it were a silly question. "Home, of course," he said.

"Well, it was kind of rude to take off without saying goodbye or thanking my folks for the party. They even commented about it."

Johnny gritted his teeth, holding back a barbed response. Instead, he managed to squeak out, “Sorry.”

“And why didn’t you wait for me this morning? You always wait. I wanted to—”

“I don’t care what you wanted, Emmy! Why is everyone breathing down my neck?” He turned and started walking.

Emmy stood stock-still. She called out, “What’s your problem?”

But Johnny didn’t answer. He took a left at the corner, away from the direction of school. He heard her call out one more time, “Where are you going?”

He didn’t know. But it didn’t matter. He only knew he wasn’t going to school.

At dusk, Johnny sat on his bed, looking out his window. He had spent the day on a secluded bank of the Enoch River near his grotto, tossing rocks into the slow-moving water and watching the ripples float lazily downstream. He was still deep in thought when a knock at his door interrupted his contemplation.

“John Avery?” Fiona said.

“What is it, Fiona?”

“May I come in?”

“I’m kind of busy—”

The door opened and she entered anyway, then closed it quietly behind her.

Johnny rose and faced her. “Fiona,” he said, “I’m really not—”

“I got a call from the school this afternoon,” she interrupted softly. “Mrs. Monahan informed me that you didn’t show up for any of your classes today. She asked if you were ill. I told her I didn’t know.” She paused. “So . . . are you ill?”

Johnny saw a mix of concern, disappointment, and anger in her eyes. He took a deep breath. “No, I’m not ill.”

“Then may I ask where in the world you were all day?” Though her voice remained soft, her tone was sharp, and her green eyes bored right into him.

“The river,” he muttered. “I . . . I guess I wasn’t in the mood for school.”

She raised her eyebrows. “The *mood*? Is this what comes from giving you permission to go trick-or-treating with your friends? You just decide to do whatever your ‘mood’ tells you to do?”

“No! I—I just have a lot of stuff going on right now and needed to get away from the stress and clear my head. That’s all!” He wrung his hands. “Probably wasn’t the best choice I could have made.”

“No, it wasn’t,” she snapped. She also took a breath, and her face softened. “But I suppose I understand—especially considerin’ there’s somethin’ going on between you and your father.”

Johnny stopped and blinked. “Um, ‘going on’?”

She crossed her arms. “I’m not blind, John Avery. Your glow formula worked very well. I saw you pass something to your Da last night. And saw him stuff it in his jacket before you went out.”

Johnny’s heart sank. “Fiona, I can’t tell you—”

She held up a hand. “I neither want nor need to know about it. It’s between you two. But I *do* need to know where you are during the day. Is that clear?”

He lowered his eyes. “Yes, ma’am.” Then he said, “Wait—does this mean you haven’t told Dad?”

She frowned. “No, I haven’t—yet. But if it happens again—”

“It won’t!” Johnny cut in.

“See that it doesn’t.” She uncrossed her arms, turned, and moved to the door. “Supper’ll be ready in ten minutes.”

Johnny watched her open the door. This was the second time she had covered for him with his father. Remorse welled up in him. “Fiona.”

She stopped. “Yes?”

“I’m really sorry for . . . well, for all the trouble I cause you.”

She stepped to him, caressed his cheek, and tugged his ear gently. “You are a handful sometimes, John Avery.” She smiled. “But I wouldn’t have it any other way.” She turned back to the door, slipped out, and closed it quietly behind her.

Johnny sighed deeply. His life seemed to be spiraling out of control. And something inside him said that things were only going to get worse.

Chapter Thirteen

At supper, Johnny and his father exchanged only glances, no words. Fiona looked between them apprehensively, trying desperately to make small talk and relieve the tension that lay over them all like a thick blanket. She was only marginally successful, and as soon as the meal was complete and the table cleared, Harold immediately retired to the inner sanctum and Johnny back to his room. He felt like a tired, caged animal. After pacing around for about an hour, he decided to see if he could get some sleep.

But sleep wouldn’t come. His mind was too active. Hours passed, and eventually he heard Fiona and Charlie climb the stairs and go to their rooms. It was after midnight when his father’s footfalls reached the top of the staircase, clumped down the hallway past Johnny’s bedroom, and entered his own. The door closed.

One o’clock.

Two o’clock.

At two thirty in the morning, Johnny decided to get up and try a glass of milk. That sometimes relaxed him enough to get to sleep.

He eased his way down the creaky stairs as quietly as he could, made his way to the kitchen, poured himself a small glass, and downed it in a few gulps. He rinsed the glass, put the bottle back in the icebox, and headed back toward the stairs, white milk mustache intact. As he passed the inner sanctum, a thought struck him—one so obvious that he wondered why he hadn’t thought of it on the way to the kitchen.

Everyone was asleep. If he was careful, he could find out what his father had been writing about the journal the night before. All he had to do was go into the inner sanctum. He padded down the hallway to the study.

When he arrived at the door, he discovered that going in without his father’s permission was a lot more daunting than he expected—even more daunting than sneaking into Professor Mangle’s office at the university. His curiosity won out, though. Besides, he reasoned, his father had promised to share his findings about the journal, and he seemed to be breaking that promise. Johnny thought he had no choice.

He entered the inner sanctum, being careful to tiptoe around the creaky spots in the floorboards. Once inside, he slowly closed the door and turned on the lamp atop his father’s desk.

On the left side of the desk were two neat stacks. One looked like bills waiting to be paid, the other like student papers waiting to be graded. On the right side was one stack. An empty folder sat on a

book, *Supralapsarianism and the Decrees of God.* Johnny picked it up.

Sounded riveting.

Another folder labeled *Conference subject material* had been under that book, but inside were only scraps of paper with notes on church history and the like.

What lay under that folder was the book Johnny saw on his father's desk at the university, the one his father hid after he saw Johnny reading it.

A piece of paper hung out like a bookmark about halfway into the book. He opened to that page.

The paper was actually one of several. The book was in Latin, and Johnny saw that his dad had translated a large section of it on these pages. His father had also written some of the phrases from the journal on them, including the ones already translated. There were dates, as early as AD 415, along with names he'd never heard of. Gamaliel. Lucian. The latter name had been circled on the page the book was opened to.

Johnny took the papers, sat back in his father's leather chair, and began to read.

> Friday, December 3rd, in the year of our Lord 415.
>
> Caphargamala: twenty miles outside of Jerusalem.
>
> My name is Father Lucian. The story I recount on these pages is factual, and happened to me exactly as you will read. I attest to it, in the name of our Lord.
>
> I awoke in the middle watches of the night, not from a restful sleep, but from one hounded by dreams. Perhaps it was the lamb I had eaten, but one dream followed the next, and all stayed in my memory at my waking.
>
> The last dream troubled me the most, and remained the most vivid. In it, the Pharisee Nicodemus wept over the body of a man stoned to death outside the city gates.

A look of incredible peace and joy remained on the face of the victim. It was Stephen, the saint of God who had performed wonders and signs among the people of Jerusalem. Tenderly, Nicodemus wiped the dry blood from Stephen's eyes. He felt that he could see straight through those eyes into heaven.

Nicodemus tried picking up the broken body of the martyr. He could not do it alone. Another man approached and laid his hand on Nicodemus's shoulder.

"Allow me to help you, my friend."

Nicodemus nodded. "Thank you, Gamaliel." They lifted him and began walking the parched road away from the city.

"We will take him to my house," Gamaliel said. "He will lie in my tomb. Many saints sleep there. It is a holy place."

"Made more holy by His presence," Nicodemus added.

Stephen had been murdered two days before, and when news reached Nicodemus, he and Gamaliel ran to the north gate, expecting the birds or dogs to have defiled his body. But when they arrived . . .

It had not been touched. If not for the blood, one would have thought he simply fell asleep and had not yet awoken.

As Nicodemus and Gamaliel walked along, they prayed for Stephen's soul. And they wept more.

At that, I awoke. It was dark; only the light of a nearly gone candle lit the room. Groggy, I lay still in my makeshift bed in the baptistery, my eyelids struggling to stay open. I had been tasked with guarding the sacred relics of the church and would not leave them. I folded my hands and asked the Lord why that dream had visited me. What did it mean? God often speaks in dreams, as in the days of Joseph. Was He speaking through them now?

Entering the candlelight beside the holy relics, I beheld the figure of a man.

I felt no fear or concern. Somehow I knew the man now walking toward me meant no harm. When the man spoke, I thought I had heard that voice only moments before in my dream.

“Yes,” the man said. “You do know me.” He was tall and handsome, with a long white beard and piercing eyes. His garment was pure white and edged with small plates of gold, marked with crosses. His hand held a golden staff. “Lucian,” the man said, “I am Gamaliel. Go to Jerusalem. Tell Bishop John to open the tomb in which lie my remains and those of Stephen and Nicodemus.” And then the tone of the man’s voice changed, and his gaze hardened. “Also there is a cloak that was given me. Protect that cloak above all, for through it God may grant the owner His holy mercy.”

“Mercy?” I asked.

“Now go, retrieve the relics and safeguard them, for if not, they may be forever lost. Keep them only in your possession, for the hearts of men are wicked.” Having said this, Gamaliel disappeared.

I knelt at that very spot, and for many hours worshipped the Lord.

Three weeks later, on the twenty-sixth of December, the relics were indeed found—exactly where the vision of Gamaliel told me they would be. Bishop John and seven members of the church attended with me. The cave was replete with various items. One wooden crate contained several scrolls that I discerned were portions of Holy Scripture from the Pentateuch—the first five books of the Bible. There were writings from the early church fathers, pieces of wood and cloth that must have some significance, most likely in ownership by the saints. The cloak that the vision of Gamaliel spoke of, though, was not to be found.

Four caskets lined the back wall of the cave. Within them lay the bones of holy men of God. We all bowed our heads and prayed a silent prayer.

Afterward, the bishop said, “We must open these.”

I protested. “No, Bishop, to do so would be sacrilege!”

“There is no reason to move the caskets if someone came here before us and stole the relics already. We must look.”

I reluctantly agreed to his request. We then looked over the names scrawled into the wood of the lids.

Gamaliel. Here lay the bones of the man who had visited me in my vision, the same man who notably instructed the apostle Paul in the understanding of the law before Paul’s encounter with the Lord on the Damascus road.

Abibas, son of Gamaliel. Little was known of this man other than that he was an early convert to the most holy Christian faith. That he lay next to these pillars of the church spoke well of his devout belief.

Nicodemus. Written in the apostle John’s account of the Christ, Nicodemus sat under the teaching of our Lord, petitioned the Sanhedrin to not condemn Jesus without at least allowing Him to defend Himself, and—with Joseph of Arimathea—buried our Lord after His death.

I then saw the name on the final casket. Stephen. I told the others, “The blessed martyr lies here.”

Bishop John instructed all present to open the caskets. He walked to Stephen’s, whispered something in Greek, and with his index finger made the sign of the cross. As one, we lifted the lids of all four caskets. We had expected to be assaulted by the putrescent smell of rotted flesh.

We were not. Instead, a most agreeable and sweet fragrance rose from the caskets and filled the cave. We looked at one another, amazed.

The bishop quoted the writing of the apostle Paul. “We are unto God a sweet savour of Christ, in them that are saved, and in them that perish.”

At that moment, an even more amazing thing happened. Of those present with me in the cave, most had been afflicted with various diseases, including tumors, fevers, the falling sickness, headaches, and severe pain. At the opening of the coffins, every one was instantly healed of his maladies.

We all prayed and gave glory to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, praising Him in loud voices.

I then remembered the admonition from the vision of Gamaliel to protect the cloak he had secured there. I wondered whether it might be in Stephen’s coffin, but looking inside, found only the bones of the martyr—intact and in their natural position.

I looked next in Nicodemus’s coffin, but it too contained nothing but the bones.

I called to the men who had opened Gamaliel’s coffin. “Did you find a cloak inside?”

“No, only the remains.”

Then it struck me. Gamaliel would have placed something of such great value in an obscure place. A place that would not receive much attention. The least likely place people searching for it might look.

I looked inside the coffin of the son of Gamaliel. What I saw amazed me.

Abibas was most certainly dead, but in spite of the many years since his burial, his body had not decayed. His skin was still supple. Over 350 years later it appeared as if the corpse had been laid to rest only days prior.

Under Abibas’s head: a folded cloth.

I gently lifted the head up and slid the cloth out. Laying the head back down, I then prayed for Abibas's soul. Holding the cloth in both hands, I bent down and kissed it.

As I did, a piece of papyrus with writing on it fell out. The writing was illegible in some places, likely due to age. But bits of it could be deciphered.

Μαργαριτάρι της μεγάλης τιμής

It was Greek. It translated as, "pearl of great price."

Μεγάλη διάρκεια ζωής

"Long life."

And finally the last portion I could read.

Τα ενδύματα του Ιησού

I knew at that moment that I held a treasure the value of which could not be counted.

I gently laid the cloth down in the casket, returned the lid, and . . .

That was as far as his father had gotten in the translation. Johnny replaced the pages in the book and stacked everything back in the order he had found it, contemplating what he had read.

Okay, he thought, *so the cloth in the story healed people, and I have a cloth that also seems to heal . . . and the cloth in the story was one church saints found hundreds and hundreds of years ago. But what does that mean? Obviously, Dad thinks the two cloths are connected—or maybe even the same cloth. But how can that be? And if it is the same, then how did it end up in Grandpa Jackson's possession, and why did he want me to have it?*

There had to be more than this. He looked around the room, swiveling the chair toward the credenza. He stopped suddenly.

The key to the credenza sat atop it in a little tray.

Johnny's mind raced back to several weeks prior, when his father had given him the Whittaker Family Bible to do research for a school project. The Bible was stuffed with family history—letters and

even journal entries swelled it to half-again its original size. The Bible was now up in Johnny's room. But prior to handing it over, his father had always kept it locked in the credenza. And when he took it out to give to Johnny, he removed two pages from it, placed them back in the drawer, and locked it up again.

Were *those* pages part of this? But how could they be, since Harold had locked them away before Johnny had given Emmy the words from the journal to give to Harold? His father was being so cagey and secretive about everything else, perhaps he had been doing research on the journal and the cloth for much longer than he let on.

There was only one way to find out. Johnny knew he shouldn't do it, but since he was already there and committed, he snatched the key, unlocked the drawer, and pulled it open.

The papers from the Whittaker Family Bible were right on top. He took them out and read through them as fast as he could. They contained a journal entry from Harold:

> January 15, 1928 - Had a terrific row today with Jackson and Janneth. On the way home from U. of E., I met the Kinglassie town doctor. He told me not to worry, Johnny was perfectly fine, and everything was okay at the house—though he didn't appreciate being dragged away from his afternoon 'libation' for a prank. I raced home and I found everything with Johnny as the doctor had described. He was sitting on his mother's lap, happily munching a biscuit. The two adults, however, had a peculiar look about them, and I noticed both they and Johnny had changed clothes since the morning. I insisted they tell me what was going on, but neither of them would say anything—wretched Scottish stubbornness. I searched the cottage but found none of their clothing from that morning. I confronted J & J about it. They still said nothing, though Janneth started crying. I demanded

to know what had happened to my son. But all Jackson would say was, “As you can see, the boy is fine.” It was the latest in a string of such slights and disrespect, and I’m afraid I didn’t handle it very well. I toyed with the idea of going to the constable, but instead, I gave them an ultimatum: Either they tell me what had happened or I would leave. Neither of them said a word. So I packed a bag, returned to the university, and told my department head that I accepted the research sabbatical he had offered me last week. I leave for Europe tomorrow, and the Holy Land after that. I hope things will be much improved when I return. If I return.

At that moment, Johnny startled from a creak in the hallway floorboards.

Someone was coming.

He shoved the papers back into the credenza drawer, closed and locked it, and had just put the key back on the little tray when the door opened. Heart racing, he swiveled around in the chair to see—

“Charlie!” Johnny whispered urgently. “What are you doing up? You should be in bed!”

“So should you! Dad’s gonna tan your hide if he finds out you’ve been in here,” Charlie responded. “Why *are* you in here?”

“I was just . . . I couldn’t sleep, and . . . I . . . Never you mind. Get to bed.”

“I’m telling,” she said, leaving the room.

Johnny lurched forward, turned off the lamp, rushed out, and grabbed hold of Charlie’s arm before she could reach the stairs.

“Wait!” He put his hand over her mouth and whispered softly in her ear. “Shhh. Come here.” He cocked his head, pointing to the kitchen, and they both tiptoed down the hall to it. He removed his hand. “You want some milk?”

“Okay,” she said warily.

He retrieved the milk from the icebox and poured her a glass. She drank.

“Please, Charlie, don’t tell Dad. Or Mom.”

“I’m gonna. You’ll be in big trouble,” she stated imperiously, then took another drink.

Johnny shook his head. “Well, okay. I guess we’ll both be in big trouble then . . .”

Charlie stopped drinking and lowered the glass. “Whadaya mean ‘both’? Why would I be in trouble?”

Johnny gestured around them. “You’re here, aren’t you? Wandering around the house in the middle of the night, drinking milk. You know Mom doesn’t like you to do that.”

She looked panicked and set down the glass. “But you gave it to me!”

He shook his head. “You think that’ll matter?”

Charlie’s face puckered up, and she looked ready to cry.

Johnny patted her on the shoulder soothingly. “It’s okay,” he said. “We can work something out.”

Charlie swallowed. “Like what?”

Johnny pretended to think. “Mmmm, how about this: If you don’t tell Dad about me, I won’t tell Mom about you.”

He could see the wheels turning in her mind. He needed to sweeten the pot. “And if you *don’t* tell . . . I’ll do your chores for a week.”

Charlie’s eyes narrowed. “Two weeks.”

Johnny frowned and nodded. “Fine. Two weeks.”

“And you have to play dolls with me or anything I want.”

She was a clever little rascal. He shook his head. “Guess I’ll have to tell Mom . . .”

“Okay, okay!” she said quickly. “No dolls.”

“Good. Now let’s get to bed. And remember: not a word.”

“Not a word,” she repeated with a smile.

They crept up the stairs and into her room. She crawled into bed and whispered, “Nite,” as if nothing had happened. Then she pulled up the covers, turned over, and quickly fell asleep.

Back in his room, Johnny’s mind reeled with what he had learned.

His mother and grandfather had apparently covered up something.

That “something” had apparently happened to *him*.

And his father had abandoned them both because of it.

There would be no sleep tonight.

Chapter Fourteen

There would be little sleep for the next few nights, in fact.

Though the days passed without incident, at night, Johnny's mind would not let go of what he had learned. Even when he did drift off, he would return to his strange, unnerving, falling dream, but now the dream ended with his father turning away and walking off into the mist.

Johnny's sleep was also disrupted by the fact that Saturday was coming, and he, Emmy, Paul, and Steve were supposed to go back to Granville House that night to investigate the coffin.

He hated coffins.

At breakfast Saturday morning, Fiona greeted Johnny at the table with a cheery, “Good morning, Sleepyhead.”

Johnny managed a weak smile. If she only knew. Then she said the best thing she could have said.

“I’m going riding today,” she announced, turning over the bacon frying in a pan. “Care to join me?”

Johnny’s heart leapt. Riding was one of the things he enjoyed the most. Fiona taught him when they were in Scotland, commenting on how he seemed born to it.

“That’d be great!” he answered. The distraction of a ride would be just the thing to relax him and break him out of this melancholia needling at his spirits. In fact, at that moment he wouldn’t have minded riding as far away from his troubles as the horse would take him.

His father walked into the room, sullen. “Has anyone been in my study?” he asked.

Johnny’s heart fell. He was finding it difficult to look at his father without scowling. Now he tried to look as disinterested as possible, though he was certain his father knew instantly that he was guilty.

“John?” Harold asked.

Johnny’s bottom lip poked out as if he were mulling the question over. “Not me,” he said.

Fiona dished up the breakfast as Charlie entered the room. “No one would be poking around in that gloomy old study of yours,” Fiona said. “What it needs is a thorough cleaning.”

Charlie looked at Johnny. “I know who’s been in your study,” she said.

Johnny glared at her and nodded his head slightly toward Fiona.

“Who?” Harold asked.

Charlie smiled. “It was McDuff. I saw him go in last night.”

“Well, I don’t suppose he knows the rules,” Fiona said. “At least not yet.” She sat, and Harold said grace.

Johnny didn't hear a word of it. He looked up as his father prayed and saw Charlie grinning at him.

He wanted to throttle her. Instead he quickly ate his breakfast, then did his chores, and hers.

Two hours later, Johnny sat astride a bay mare in full gallop, Fiona two lengths behind. He suspected she held back so he could win, but that didn't stop him from enjoying the race.

After a good workout, they dismounted by a small stream, giving their horses, Toby and Earl, a rest and a cool drink of water.

"You're quiet today, John Avery," Fiona said as she stroked Earl's mane. "Everything all right?"

Johnny leaned against an elm tree shading the stream. "There's nothing wrong with being quiet, is there?"

"*Nae*. Only sometimes silence is more deafening than a scream. And more isolating than a brick wall."

"Everything's fine," he said, which he knew was a lie. Right now so much of his life felt like a lie, or at least a deception. He couldn't talk about the coffin, because he and the other kids would get in trouble for trespassing and being careless. He couldn't talk about the hobo who came into their house, because his parents thought he was being prejudiced. He couldn't talk about the journal, because his father told him not to. He couldn't talk about what he'd learned about Harold. And he had lied about not being in his father's study. *Lies are piling up like firewood*, he thought.

"Come, lad," Fiona said, "you yourself said you've been all tied up in knots lately. Don't try to avoid what the good Lord may be bringing your way."

Johnny's brow furrowed. "'Bringing my way'? What do you mean?"

Fiona rubbed Earl's chin. "Sometimes God needs to . . . get us out of our own way. We tangle our lives up so badly that God has to do something to get us untangled."

"Such as?"

"Oh, could be any number of things. Hard times, good times, wise advice, puzzling circumstances. Think of those people in the Bible that Jesus healed. The only reason they experienced His healing was because they were sick in the first place."

"So, you mean that God makes us sick . . . so He can *heal* us?"

"*Nae*, I wouldn't say that, lad. But God can use anything for the good. The important thing to do—is pay attention."

Earl whinnied. "I believe Earl here is eager for another race. Last one home's a rotten egg!" she said, climbing into the saddle.

Johnny mounted his horse, and they had a spirited race back to the stable. As they rode, Fiona's words echoed in his mind: *God can use anything for the good.*

He decided to find out if those words were true.

Tonight. At Granville House.

He would take the healing cloth. And try it on Steve.

Chapter Fifteen

Johnny scampered over to the porch roof's edge, grabbed the trellis, and began climbing down. When his head cleared the porch roof, he glimpsed someone standing in the dark, looking at him. He let out a muffled yelp of surprise and literally jumped off the trellis, flying catlike away from the porch, landing on his feet on the ground below.

It was Emmy. "What are you *doing*?" she whispered loudly.

Johnny's heart was pounding so hard he thought it might burst out of his chest. "What am *I* doing?" he answered. "Are you *trying* to scare me to death?"

She shook her head. “You’re so jumpy! Who did you think would be standing here?”

“*No one*. It’s midnight! Didn’t I tell you I’d come get you at your place?”

“No. You’ve barely said a word to me since you nearly bit my head off the morning after Halloween,” she scolded. “I wasn’t even sure you’d come tonight, after that.”

They started walking toward Granville House.

“I’m sorry about that,” Johnny said. “I shouldn’t have taken things out on you.”

Emmy shrugged. “That’s all right. I figured something happened.” She paused, then added, “Did something happen?”

Yes, he thought. “No,” he said.

“Does that mean something did but you don’t wanna talk about it?”

He sighed. “Maybe.”

She nodded. “Okay, message received.”

She looked a little offended, so he said, “But thanks for asking.”

Emmy smiled at him. Then she looked away and asked, “Are you still nervous about seeing the coffin again?”

He wasn’t ashamed to admit it. “I guess. You?”

“Actually, I’m kind of excited. What do you think we’ll find in it?”

“I don’t wanna think about it,” he replied. “I just wanna do it and get it over with.” He took off running, and she followed.

The whole way there, Johnny kept pondering how he would use the cloth on Steve and get Steve to agree to it. He really wanted to do it in private, and without getting Steve’s hopes up. He decided he’d have to wing it and figure it out on the spur of the moment. “God can use anything for good,” Fiona had said. The cloth had worked on McDuff—or so it seemed. He supposed that could have been his imagination playing tricks on him. He would find out tonight, one way or the other.

Johnny saw Paul standing in front of the gates to the house—alone.

“Where’s Steve?” Johnny asked.

“Mom took him to the hospital in Durham,” Paul replied.

“What? What happened? Is he okay?” Emmy exclaimed. “He wasn’t hurt when he fell through the floor, was he?”

Paul shook his head. “I don’t think so. He just gets sick like this. He has to go to the hospital a lot.” He sighed sadly. “One of these times he’s not going to come home.”

Emmy hugged him. “I’m so sorry, Paul,” she said.

Johnny stood back. He remembered the smell of death when his mother and grandfather died. He could make out the same odor tonight.

“I’m not going in there,” Paul said, pointing to Granville House. “I just came to tell you. I’d better get back before my dad finds out. He never sleeps when Seve gets stick.” He looked down. “When Steve gets sick.” Paul walked away, shoulders sagging as though they carried the weight of the world.

Johnny and Emmy exchanged glances. “What do you want to do?” he asked.

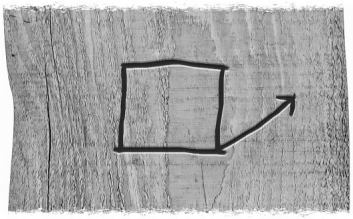
“Cry,” Emmy said. “But we’re here. We should check it out.”

As they walked up to the gate, Johnny saw another symbol, this one freshly carved into the gatepost. It looked like a hat with an arrow pointing off the brim.

“What do you suppose that means?” Emmy whispered.

“Something about a pointy-brimmed hat, I guess,” Johnny answered.

They walked through the gate and up to the front door. It was cracked open, so they slowly pushed it wide enough to sneak in. They walked across the



weathered floorboards into the adjacent
room where they had all fallen in, stopping at the precipice of the hole.

Johnny wished he had never seen this coffin. He knew his fear of it was irrational. His Grandpa Jackson used to say that you only fear what you don't know. In this case, Johnny decided he would rather not know anyway. Still, in order to save face, he couldn't turn back now. He steeled himself against his fear and gingerly climbed down into the crawl space, helping Emmy in after him.

He turned on his flashlight, got on his hands and knees, gritted his teeth, and crawled over to the coffin. Emmy followed behind.

Through the yellow light, Johnny could see the coffin was quite old. The wood had warped over time, and winding trails chewed by termites along the length of the boards gave it the look of an antique road map through hilly terrain.

On the lid were drawn what seemed to be patterns similar to those that might be found on a quilt. He looked them over carefully, committing the shapes to memory. Emmy crouched beside the coffin, looking as though she were about to be sick.

"Are you okay?" Johnny asked, hoping she didn't ask him the same question.

"You'll know when we open the lid. If a body's inside, I can't promise anything."

They were poised to lift the lid when they heard voices at the front door.

"Did you leave this open?" the first voice asked. It was a man's voice.

"Yeah, prob'ly," the second voice answered—also a man's. "Sorry about that, Boss."

Johnny quickly turned off his flashlight and motioned for Emmy to crawl back under the floor and away from the opening. They scurried backward, feeling their way through the darkness.

The men headed straight for them. Within seconds their footsteps were immediately above Johnny and Emmy, moving toward the hole. They stopped, turned a flashlight on, and shone it into the opening. The first man spoke again. Johnny instantly recognized the voice this time.

It was Professor Mangle's.

"When did it happen?" Mangle asked, clearly irritated.

"Some kids came in on Halloween," the second man said.

His voice sounded familiar too, Johnny thought, but he couldn't quite place it.

"I was all the way upstairs," the second man continued. "One of the boys was coming up when the crash happened. He ran back down. Lucky for us."

"Lucky for *him*," Mangle said.

The second man coughed hoarsely. "Anyway, they all ran off a few minutes later."

"I hope they didn't look inside."

"I don't think they had time—they were too spooked by the coffin. They skedaddled out of here like it was a fire drill," he said. "I mean, as fast as they could, pushing that wheelchair an' all."

Mangle's voice changed, more curious now. "Wheelchair? One of them was in a *wheelchair*?"

"Yeah. I reckon that's why they broke through. That trapdoor wasn't meant to hold any weight."

"Steven," Mangle muttered. "*Mein Sohn*. I *told* the boys to stay out of here! The last thing I need is for them to find out about this."

"I'm sure they didn't see nuthin'. An' what if they did? They couldn't connect it to you."

"Make sure it stays that way," Mangle commanded. "You moved her out of here, *ja*?"

"Yassuh, though I gotta be honest: I'm tired of doing it. It's hard work moving her without no one seein'. Some boy almost stumbled on her in the forest a few days back. That's why I moved her here."

“Well, choose a better place, man!” Mangle snapped.

“Ain’t no one gonna find her now. They won’t *never* find her.” He snorted. “’Sides, even if they did, old Rakia, she can’t exactly give us away now, can she?” He let out an odd, trilling laugh.

Mangle grunted and walked away. The other man trilled again and then followed Mangle across the floor and up the stairs, muttering as he went.

Johnny motioned for Emmy to stay still. He wanted to be certain Mangle and his accomplice were gone. Thoughts raced through his mind. Professor Mangle did unnerve him, but the idea that he could be involved in murder seemed unbelievable. Still, he heard what they said about . . .

Rakia.

The note. That name was on the note the boy had slipped him on Halloween night. *Rakia would have to be moved.* And tonight the man with Mangle said he had to move her again. He wondered if . . .

Yes! He suddenly remembered where he’d heard that trilling laugh before. He heard it from the hobo who came to his house on Halloween! The man spoken of in the note; the man who saw him down by the river!

The coast seemed clear, so Johnny nudged Emmy, and they both crawled back toward the opening in the floor. He was about to jump out of the hole when he heard something move. He turned on his flashlight in time to witness a chilling sight.

The lid on the coffin was . . . *rising*.

Then, to his shock and horror, a skeletal hand emerged. It reached down and wrote something in the dirt. Johnny pointed his flashlight so he could read it.

Help . . . him, the light revealed.

Johnny scarcely breathed. He sat, rigid, unable to move. Then he felt something on his arm—soft at first, then gripping tighter and tighter. He tried crying out, but no sounds came from his mouth.

Finally, the hand began to shake him, and his flashlight fell to the ground, breaking the bulb. It was pitch dark again—just him . . . and the thing in the coffin!

Then, a voice moaned, low and mournful, “Jooohn . . . ny . . . Jooohn . . . ny . . .” It suddenly penetrated the darkness, into his thoughts: “Johnny!”

It was Emmy. She grabbed the flashlight out of his hand.

How did it get back there? he wondered.

She turned it on, illuminating the crawl space as well as her panicked face. “What are you doing?” she asked. “They’re gone!”

“Yeah . . . upstairs,” he answered, confused.

“No. *Gone* gone! They just walked out the front door!” She studied him for a moment. “Are you all right? You’re not having a stroke, are you?”

“Did you *see* that?” he blurted.

“See what? What are you talking about?”

He pointed to the place in the dirt where the hand had scratched out its message. “That! Right . . . there!”

The writing was gone.

Johnny crawled over to the coffin. The dirt beside it was untouched, save for the handprints he and Emmy had tracked into it. The lid sat firmly atop the coffin, unmoved. Perplexed, Johnny screwed up his courage, grabbed the lid, and wrenched it open. Emmy covered her eyes and gasped.

It was empty—just a dirty silk lining . . . and the single boot sticking through the broken end.

Whoever Rakia was, she had indeed been moved to another resting place.

And Johnny intended to find it.

Chapter Sixteen

Monday morning, Johnny and Emmy walked the long walk to school. Fall was making way for winter, with light swirls of snow wafting down and covering the dormant, brown sod. The thin, white blanket gave a sheen of wonder to a world that had grown darker to Johnny over the past few weeks. They used their trip to brainstorm what they should do in light of everything that had happened Saturday night. “We need to know what we don’t know,” said Johnny. “Like, who Rakia is—”

“Was,” Emmy interrupted.

“Was,” he agreed. “I tried to tell Fiona this morning that it isn’t safe to open our home to every person who knocks on the door. She just laughed and said I have a very active imagination and that people who have enough courage to ask for a little help should be welcome anytime.”

Emmy grimaced. “Unless that person has been moving dead bodies around town.” She sighed. “So, how do you propose we find out more about this Rakia person?”

“Meet me after school down at the custodial closet,” he said.

That afternoon, Ben listened patiently as Johnny and Emmy told him everything that had happened at Granville House. He nodded occasionally and raised his right and left eyebrows independently when prompted by an unexpected twist in the narrative. The only part Johnny left out was the skeletal handwriting in the dirt. He wasn’t about to tell anyone that—at least not yet. He’d never experienced anything like it before. More than likely, it was what Fiona had said: He had an active imagination. At least that’s what he kept telling himself.

When Johnny and Emmy had finished their story, Ben stroked his chin, scratching the gray whiskers.

“That’s quite the tale,” he said. He cocked his head and peered at Johnny. “You always raise Cain like this, boy? You ain’t been in town but a shake or two and already got a coupla full-blown adventures under your belt.”

“My stepmother says I have a gift,” Johnny grunted.

“Smart woman,” Ben agreed.

“So, what do you think we should do?”

Ben leaned back in his chair, considered them both for a moment, took a deep breath, and said, “Nuthin’.”

Johnny and Emmy looked at each other with equal measures of astonishment and disappointment. “Nothing!” Emmy exclaimed. “Nothing at *all*?”

“’Less Johnny wants to help me finish a project I been working on.” Ben rose, walked to the back of the room, and pushed out a small, metal-framed wheelchair, with a car battery sitting in a cradle behind it. “I’m makin’ this for Steven. Ran into his mama today. She says he should be comin’ home by week’s end. I’m tryin’ to figure out how to power it electrically. That way he can get around when he wants, without someone pushin’ him along. A boy needs to get on under his own steam.”

Emmy smiled. “That’s really nice,” she said. “I’m sure he’ll love it. But—”

“But are you sure I shouldn’t do anything?” Johnny interjected. “I mean, what if that guy is dangerous?”

“I’ll look into it. You just keep it under your hat for now, all right?”

“But—”

Both of Ben’s eyebrows arched up this time, stopping Johnny midsentence.

Johnny slowly nodded. “All right.”

“Now, how about it? You wanna help me work on this thing?” he asked, patting the back of the wheelchair.

“Sure, but . . . how?”

Ben peered over the top of his glasses. “Remember the experiment you told me you tried? Storin’ electricity from lightning? I was wonderin’ if you kept after it. Might suggest an alternate recharging option. If the battery will accept that charge, might be we can find a way to use something else to recharge it. These batteries die pretty quick.”

“I haven’t done anything more with that experiment since Deputy Miller told me to stay off the water tower.”

“Didn’t you tell me the dangerous work was already done? The wires are still out there, right?”

Johnny thought for a second. “Yeah.”

“And you already connected them to the rod on the tower, right?”

“Uh-huh.”

“Battery still out there?”

“Unless someone took it.”

“Then seems to me, all you gotta do is stay on the ground, connect the wires to the battery, and wait for a storm. Am I missin’ somethin’?”

“Yeah. It’s November. We won’t see any more lightning this year,” Johnny lamented.

Ben frowned. “That so? . . . I suppose the weather bureau and the Farmer’s Almanac must be wrong then. Wouldn’t be the first time.” He pushed the wheelchair back into the corner.

“What did they say?” Emmy asked.

“Big storm’s comin’ this weekend. But Johnny’s probably right. What do they know?”

Johnny held up his hands. “Hey, I’m game if you think it might help.”

“Never know until ya try,” Ben noted. “But you do need to get your folks’ permission first. Y’hear?”

Johnny nodded, not sure how he would accomplish that.

“All right.” Ben turned to grab his cleaning supplies.

The kids took that as their signal to leave and began walking to the door. Just then, Johnny remembered something. “Hey, do you know anything about the symbols around town?” he asked.

“What symbols you talkin’ about?” Ben asked, gathering a bucket and the mop he called Sarepta.

“One was of two diamonds—you know, like on the playing cards. Another was the number eight with a line down the middle of it.”

“Oh, you mean the hobo code,” Ben stated flatly, setting down his things.

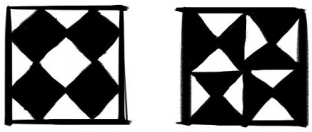
“Hobos have a code?” Emmy questioned.

“Sure they do. A whole lot of ’em. They scratch ’em in fence posts and such to leave notes for others that come behind. Some are warnings, others are about where to get food and such. The two diamonds mean to stay quiet around there. And the number eight with the slash means church folks live about. They’re usually more generous.”

“We also saw one with two Ws,” Emmy noted.

“And one more with a hat and pointy brim,” Johnny said.

“Well, if I got it right, the first one ain’t Ws, they’s teeth. Means a vicious dog lives there. And the hat one I never saw. Can’t say what that means.”



Emmy suddenly remembered something. “Oh! What about the designs on the coffin?”

“I forgot about those,” Johnny admitted.

Ben’s eyebrows rose. “Symbols on the coffin? What symbols?”

Johnny sketched them out on a piece of paper.

“Those ain’t hobo code,” Ben said.

“Are you sure?” asked Emmy.

“Very. That’s somethin’ completely different. Somethin’ I know too well.”

Johnny’s brow furrowed. “What?”

“Symbols from the Underground Railroad.”

Johnny and Emmy looked at each other, eyes wide. “Wait—*the* Underground Railroad?” she said. “The one Harriet Tubman worked on?”

Ben nodded solemnly. “One and the same. Usually you’d find them symbols on quilts hangin’ on the line. Back in the day, before slavery was abolished, they gave runaway slaves directions on the safest way to travel, or warned them about dangers in the area. That

first one with all the squares in it is called ‘crossroads.’ So when the runaway slaves saw that, they knew to travel to the main crossroad in Cleveland, Ohio.”

“That’s so neat!” Emmy squealed.

“That second pattern is called ‘bow ties.’ Since most slaves was in tattered clothes, they was easy to spot. When they saw this pattern, they knew the owner of the house would give them nice clothes so they could blend in with the free blacks along the way.”

“But why would the symbols be carved on a coffin lid?” Johnny asked.

“Folks is clever; that’s why.” Ben set his bucket on the floor and then set Sarepta in the bucket and leaned on her handle. “In those days, it wasn’t unusual for coffins to be made ahead of time, preparing for the inevitable, you see. Undertakers would leave ’em outside, leaned up against a wall to keep water from pooling up inside ’em.” He leaned forward, his voice getting lower and softer. “There was them coffins . . . just standin’ there. People walkin’ by, tryin’ to ignore ’em. But out of the corner of their eyes, they saw ’em. And when they did, all they could think of was that they was boxes of death . . . that one day, *they’d* be inside a box like that, waitin’ to meet their Maker. But—” he straightened up, and his voice became stronger and a bit proud—“that box they saw weren’t no box of death. It was a box of life. It sat outside like a beacon, pointin’ runaway slaves to freedom.”

“Pretty smart,” Johnny said, “putting the directions on something no one wanted to look at.”

“But how did the slaves know to look?” Emmy asked.

Ben smiled. “Because, child, one of the main leaders of the Underground Railroad was a Quaker man by the name of Levi . . . Levi *Coffin*.”

Emmy’s jaw dropped. “We were looking at a piece of history!”

“An important one, too,” Ben added.

Johnny was still puzzled. “But that doesn’t explain why the coffin was down in the crawl space. Or who the woman in it was.”

“I’m not convinced it *was* a woman,” Ben said.

“But we heard them say so,” Emmy persisted. “They moved it several times.”

“And why would they do that?” Ben asked. “Why not just bury it someplace permanent? Or dispose of it someplace where no one would even notice? No, there’s more to this thing than meets the eye.”

“But they called her by name,” Johnny blurted.

Ben stiffened. “You didn’t tell me that.”

“Sure I did.” He paused, thinking. “Didn’t I?”

Emmy shook her head. “No. I wondered why, but I figured you had your reasons.”

Johnny shook his head. Everything going on in his life at the moment had begun to jumble into one big, confusing pool. “I guess I just didn’t think of it.”

Ben rested Sarepta’s handle against the workbench and fixed his gaze on Johnny. “What was the name?”

“Rakia. They said her name was Rakia.”

A shadow moved over Ben’s face, like a cloud passing in front of the sun.

“Ben, did you know her? Rakia?” Emmy asked.

He hesitated for a moment, lost in thought. “Maybe,” he admitted, “though if it’s who I think it is, I know her by another name.”

Johnny and Emmy exchanged glances. “What name?” he asked.

Ben scowled at him. “Never you mind.”

“Does it have to do with the Underground Railroad?” Emmy asked gently.

Ben slowly shook his head, and his voice dropped to a low growl. “No, girl. It has nothin’ to do with that.” Sadness filled Ben’s eyes, and pain formed the lines on his face. “Sometimes,” Ben almost whispered, “folk use holy vessels for unholy purposes.”

He picked up the bucket and Sarepta and walked out the door.

Emmy looked at Johnny. “What was *that* about?” she asked.

“I don’t know,” Johnny said. “But there’s obviously more going on here than we thought. And Ben might be the missing piece of the puzzle.”

Chapter Seventeen

The storm that the almanac and weather bureau forecasted didn't come that weekend. Johnny had given up hope that he'd be able to resume his experiment before spring, as winter's colder air seemed to be beating back any vestiges of autumn's last gasp.

What did come that weekend was more bad news.

"I just heard from Karl. Steve's gotten worse," Harold said.

"But I thought he was getting better," Johnny said. "That he was supposed to come home this weekend."

"What happened?" Fiona asked.

“Pneumonia. In both lungs,” Harold answered. The way he and Fiona looked at one another told Johnny everything he needed to know: They weren’t sure Steve would live through it.

“What are the doctors doing for him?” Johnny said.

“There’s not much they *can* do, except let it run its course and hope his body is strong enough to fight it off,” Harold replied.

I have to take the cloth to him, Johnny thought. “Can we visit him?” he asked.

“I’m afraid not, John,” his father answered. “He’s much too sick. The doctors don’t want anyone unintentionally exposing him to any other sickness.”

“But I have to see him. Please!”

“If he gets better, we’ll go. But not now. It’s too dangerous.”

It’s more dangerous for him if I don’t go, Johnny thought. “But, Dad—”

“Enough, John!” Harold snapped. “We’ll go once he starts to improve.”

Johnny paused. “What if he doesn’t improve?”

Fiona put her hand on Johnny’s shoulder. “We need to pray that he does, love.”

Over the next few weeks, Steve alternated between improving and being a hair’s breadth away from dying. Every morning, Johnny awoke wondering whether his friend had made it through the night. Each night he had.

Johnny reflected on the notes his father had translated from the book. If the cloth in the story was the one in his possession—and according to his father’s research it seemed to be—then it must have healed McDuff. And if it healed McDuff, it could also heal Steve.

Johnny considered going to see Steve without his father's knowing, but he knew that even if he made it to the hospital, the nurses would not let him into Steve's room. *He just needs to improve enough so I can get in and use the cloth to completely heal him!* Johnny thought.

Johnny also pondered the mystery he literally fell into at Granville House. He was actually relieved that Ben told him to do nothing about it. At the moment, he didn't have the heart or energy to do much of anything until Steve improved. It seemed crazy that Steve's own father could be mixed up in a murder, especially since he seemed to care so much about his son. Johnny tried talking to Ben about it from time to time at school, but all Ben would say was, "Don't worry 'bout that stuff. You leave it to me."

The Friday before Thanksgiving, a phone call came from the Mangle home. Harold listened to Karl as the others in the house held their breath. After a short pause, the concern on Harold's face turned into a relieved smile. "That's great news, Karl!" he said. "I'm so glad to hear it!"

A huge, collective sigh of relief filled the room. Johnny whispered to his father, "Ask if I can visit!"

Harold nodded. "Do you think Steve's up for visitors? Johnny has been champing at the bit to get over there." A pause, and then Harold nodded. "Excellent! We'll come first thing tomorrow."

The next morning, Harold pulled into the parking lot of Duke University Hospital, a relatively new facility that in its short history had already become one of the top medical institutions in the nation. It stood like a castle against the gray sky, an imposing structure that gave an air of hope to the ailing patients who entered its doors.

Inside, the receptionist provided directions to the pediatric wing and Steve's room. When they entered, they found two beds there, both occupied—one by Steve, the other by Karl. Paul sat on a chair in the corner.

Mangle, who'd obviously fallen asleep in his clothes, rose as soon as they entered. "Pardon. I didn't expect you to come so early," he said.

"Where's Frieda?" Harold asked.

"We take shifts," Karl said. "She'll spell me this afternoon."

Johnny walked over to Steve's bed. "Hey, pally," he said. "How are you feeling?"

"Oh, just hunky-dory," Steve answered, grinning faintly. His breathing sounded a little raspy, but not as bad as Johnny expected. He remembered when Charlie came down with the croup a few years back. The rattle in her breathing and the hoarseness of her cough were sounds he had never forgotten, they'd scared him so badly.

Mangle blathered on and on about hospital beds and the extravagant cost of medical care and the realization that doctors really do "practice" medicine. Once he finally ran out of commas and landed on a period, Harold asked, "Care for a cup of coffee, Karl? You look like you could use a break."

Mangle hesitated for a moment but then responded, "*Ja*, that sounds *gut*. I need something to clear the *Spinnweben* out. These hospital beds are hard as a rock. I didn't sleep much at all." As they walked out the door, Mangle added, "I'll check on your breakfast, boys."

"We already had ours," Steve answered.

"You were sleeping when they brought it in," Paul added.

Mangle looked surprised. "I guess I slept better than I thought." As the door closed behind them, Johnny faintly heard Mangle saying, "I'm glad we have a few minutes alone, Whittaker. There's something I've been wanting to ask you about."

Johnny sat in a chair beside Steve's bed, his bag resting on his lap. The bag felt much heavier than it appeared due to the gravity of its contents. The cloth was safely tucked inside.

"Thanks for coming," Steve said. "It's dull as dishwater around here." His eyes resumed that impish mischief that Johnny noted the first time they met. "When my dad isn't working, he's sleeping. And Paul listens to football on the radio. College stuff mostly. I like baseball much better, but Duke is doing great this year."

"Yeah, Southern Conference champs so far," Paul chimed in. "Though North Carolina is closing in."

"We should talk to our dads—see if they can get us tickets to a game," said Johnny.

"Soon as I get outta here!" Steve smiled, then turned serious. Turning to Johnny, he asked, "Hey, whatever happened at Granville House?"

The suddenness of the question startled Johnny. He'd forgotten that Steve was supposed to be there the night they returned to check on the contents of the coffin. He hesitated. How do you tell someone that his father is hiding a dead body?

He decided to say just enough to keep from lying. "Oh, a dead end."

Steve laughed hoarsely. "Dead end. I get it!"

Johnny hadn't meant the pun, but it served his purpose. He chuckled in response. "Yeah. The coffin was actually empty. All that for nothing."

"Well, that's boring," Steve said. "I hope you've had *some* adventure while I've been locked up in this jail."

"What could happen in dreary old Provenance?" Johnny sighed, even as he thought, *You have no idea how much is going on in that little town.*

Steve chuckled, which turned into a cough. He wasn't strong enough to cough with enough air to expel the mucus in his lungs. He choked badly, and Paul rushed to him, lifted him into a sitting

position, and patted his back until the phlegm came up.

Paul looked at Johnny's pale white face and said, "It's okay. This happens a lot."

Johnny girded up his courage and opened his knapsack. "I want to show you guys something," he said. "But you have to promise to keep it a secret. Okay?"

Steve looked tired after his episode. "Is it illegal?" he asked. "I didn't think you were that kind of kid."

"No, it's not illegal. Do you guys promise?"

"Wild horses couldn't drag it out of me," Steve said, closing his eyes in fatigue.

"Paul?"

"Sure, I promise."

"I found something," Johnny said, his hand reaching into his bag. "Something important."

Steve's eyes opened, his interest piqued. "Yeah? What?"

Johnny pulled out the cloth. "This," he said.

Paul stood and walked over. "It must be valuable to wrap it up like that."

"Nothing's wrapped up. This is what I found."

"A rag?" Paul said in a deadpan tone.

"Further proof that nothing exciting happens in Provenance," Steve snorted.

"You may not believe it," Johnny acknowledged, then stated with an air of mystery, "but this . . . is a *healing* cloth."

"Oh, brother," Steve said, turning his head in disgust. "You need to go to acting school, buddy. Clark Gable has nothing to worry about."

Johnny began to spin a fantastic tale, hoping to get them to at least go along with him. If the cloth didn't work, they would regard it as nothing more than an imaginative story. But if it did . . . "This cloth is hundreds of years old," Johnny said. "It's been on every continent on the planet, and it has been known to heal every sort of disease.

Maharajas and kings and emperors have been healed of pox and other diseases. Kingdoms have been saved. Kids got rid of pimples. Bald men grew hair. This thing even healed a dog."

"Good grief," Paul said, shaking his head.

"I have a pimple," Steve said. "Put 'er on!"

Johnny motioned to Paul and instructed, "Pull the blanket off him. The cloth should lay directly over him."

As Paul did that, Johnny ceremonially unfolded the cloth. He laid it carefully over Steve and then said, "Stand back and be amazed!"

Steve lay silent for a minute—so long that Johnny wondered whether the cloth was helping or hurting. He exchanged glances with Paul.

"Steve?" Paul nudged him. "Are you all right?"

Steve's eyes slowly opened. He turned and looked at Johnny. "I feel . . . something . . . happening . . ."

Johnny's heart began to race, and he waited, hoping to see a miracle take place in that hospital room.

Steve's voice grew louder with each word he spoke. "I'm . . . I'm . . . *III' MMM . . .* !" He stopped, then casually added, "Hungry. You have anything in that knapsack to eat?"

Johnny's heart fell. "You're not healed?" he asked, crestfallen.

"Nope. I guess it's just a piece of old cloth after all," Steve said.

Paul shoved Johnny and said, "That was dumb. I like playing around too, but not about stuff like this." He grabbed the cloth off Steve, wadded it up, and threw it in Johnny's face. "Get that clupid stoth out of here."

"Knock it off, Paul," Steve scolded. "He was just trying to have some fun."

Johnny's eyes welled up with tears. "I'm sorry, Steve," he said. "I didn't mean . . ." His voice trailed off.

"You've got a good imagination," Steve said. "But there's no imagining this away. It's how things are meant to be."

"Stop saying that," Paul urged him. "You're gonna get better."

“Maybe *you* need to stop saying *that*. It’s not like I can’t do anything, Paul. I can do a lot of things—most of them as good as anyone, some even better.”

Paul walked back to his chair in the corner and sat down, glowering at Johnny the entire time.

“Besides,” Steve added, “it’s almost Thanksgiving. We need to spend time thinking about what we’re *thankful* for.”

Johnny tentatively asked him, “Don’t you . . . ever wish you could walk?”

Steve cleared his throat and gazed through the hazy hospital window into the cloudy fall sky beyond.

“Someday I *am* going to walk,” Steve said resolutely. “I know it.”

Steve looked at Johnny and smiled. “Stop feeling sorry for me. I get enough of that from him,” he said, nodding at Paul, sulking in the corner. “The thing is,” he said with an air of peace, “I don’t believe that my having muscular dystrophy is a punishment or some . . . mistake of nature. I think . . .” he said, searching for the right words, “I think it’s a gift. After all, God can use anything for good, you know.”

Chapter Eighteen

The next day was Sunday, so the family attended service at the University Church. Afterward, as they drove home, the wind picked up, and a few drops of rain began to fall.

“Can you believe this weather?” Fiona said. “You’d think it was August instead of November!”

In the distance, a thundercloud loomed. A faint flash lit the cloud, and a few seconds later, a low rumble boomed.

Harold said, “Looks like we’re in for a storm.”

I need to get to the water tower, Johnny thought. *This storm looks perfect for my experiment.*

He started to ask permission to work on his experiment but then quickly decided against it. After what happened the last time he was there, his father would never allow it. Then an idea sprang to mind. “Can I go over to Emmy’s when we get home?” he said.

“I suppose so,” Fiona answered. “After Sunday dinner.”

The storm could be gone by then, he worried. Before he knew it, he spouted out another lie: “Her folks invited me over for dinner at their place. I should have asked earlier. I’m sorry.” He knew he’d catch it if his parents found out, but they never spoke with Emmy’s parents, so it was an unlikely danger.

“Yes, you should have,” Harold scolded. Fiona put her hand on his arm. He sighed loudly and added, “Very well, but don’t be gone all day.”

When they pulled into their driveway, Johnny barely waited for the car to stop before he bolted from it, sprinted into the house, changed out of his church clothes, grabbed his bag, went out to the shed, tossed a few tools in the bag, and then trotted to Emmy’s house and knocked on the front door.

Her mother answered. “Hello, Johnny!” she greeted with a trace of an Italian accent. “How was church this morning?”

“Fine, Mrs. Capello. Yours?”

“Oh, it was wonderful. Very inspiring message.”

“That’s great. Is Emmy home?”

“She is. Come in.”

“Thank you.” Johnny entered.

Mrs. Capello called out for Emmy, who was already tucked away in her room. “I need to get back to cooking dinner,” Mrs. Capello said. “Would you like to join us?”

“Actually, I was going to ask if Emmy could come to my place for dinner.”

Emmy walked in. “That sounds great,” she said.

“But I’m making creamed chipped beef on toast.” Her mother said it as if the meal were an allure.

Emmy’s eyes bulged, and her mouth spread out in a wide frown. “Yeah. I *know*. May I? Please?”

“No one appreciates my cooking around here,” Mrs. Capello said with mock disdain. “Take your umbrella. It’s starting to rain.” Then she made her way to the kitchen.

“Thanks for the reprieve,” Emmy whispered.

“Actually, we’re not going to my place for dinner,” Johnny softly responded.

“Then where *are* we going?”

“I’ll tell you on the way,” he answered as they walked out the door.

The rain had begun to pour by the time they reached the water tower. Thunder rumbled nearby. “The lightning’s getting closer,” Johnny observed.

“I’m hungry,” Emmy whined. “I can’t believe you didn’t bring any food with you.”

“Who can think of food when we’re on the verge of a scientific breakthrough?” Johnny nobly declared.

He found the car battery where he had left it, concealed in a patch of overgrown prairie grass. He set down his bag in the overturned dirt directly under the tower and smiled. The battery was a pleasant reminder of their previous adventure there. He reached into the bag and grabbed a pair of pliers.

“What do you want me to do?” Emmy asked.

Johnny pointed to the side of the tower. “See if you can find the wire. It should still be hanging off the tower.”

A bolt of lightning flashed, the almost-immediate report of thunder resounding loudly.

“That was close!” Emmy yelled, bug-eyed.

“Yeah. Hurry!” Johnny commanded.

Johnny loosened the cable connections on the battery terminals. He had left the cables on, planning to stick the wire between the cable connections and the terminals so he could tighten them down securely. Because of the fall rain and the early light snow, however, the terminals were rusty.

“The wire will never make a connection through that rust,” he muttered. He looked in his knapsack for something to clean them off with. The first thing his hand landed on was the cloth. *Might as well,* he thought. *It’s no good for anything else.*

Johnny wiped the terminals with it, getting off as much rust as possible, and then tossed the cloth on the ground. When he did, he snickered. The rust from the terminals fashioned what looked like a face on the cloth.

He imagined the face belonging to one of the names in the book he’d found in his father’s study. *Lucian, was it? Or Gama-something?* But his smile turned to astonishment when the rusty face on the cloth *began to speak*.

“Help him,” the face said.

Johnny recoiled. He looked for Emmy, but she had vanished. He hunched over the cloth. Again, the voice repeated, “Help him!”

“Help who?” Johnny asked.

The face turned toward the back part of the Granville House property. “Help him,” it repeated.

Johnny followed the face’s eyeline. The Mangle home was in that direction. “You mean Steve? I tried,” Johnny answered.

“Help . . . *Ben*,” the voice said, the eyes of the face serious and cold.

At that moment, a lightning bolt carved a hole in the sky over Granville House. Johnny’s eyes darted up to see how close it hit. “With the experiment? I am!” Johnny explained, looking back down at the face.

But it was gone. The rain pouring down had washed the rust from the cloth. Johnny took it and put it back in his bag.

At that moment, Emmy grabbed his shoulder. She held the wire. “Take this thing, quick!” she urged. “If I get electrocuted, my dad’ll kill you.”

I must be tired, Johnny thought. *I’m starting to hallucinate.*

Lightning flashed all around. He grabbed the wire from Emmy. “Is it still connected up top?”

“I think so,” she answered. “It’s hard to see in all this rain.”

He nodded, then wrapped the wire around the positive terminal, and tightened the cable connector securely over it.

“Done!” he called out. Standing up, he grabbed Emmy’s arm. “Let’s get under the tower! Hurry!”

They ran and knelt beneath it, hoping the lightning would connect with the battery—and not with them.

Within seconds, a huge bolt of lightning flashed immediately above, lighting up the darkened sky. In that moment, Johnny saw someone walking out through the back gate behind Granville House into the forest beyond. He recognized the man immediately.

It was Ben.

Chapter Nineteen

Emmy had seen him too. “Why do you suppose Ben is there?” she asked.

“He said he’d look into what was going on in that house,” he replied. “Maybe that’s what he’s doing.”

“Should we follow him?”

“Well, he did tell us to let him handle—”

Before Johnny could finish his thought, a thick bolt of lightning struck the water tower. Johnny’s hand had been gripping one of the metal braces, and he felt the electricity jump into his body, throwing

him backward onto the ground outside.

Emmy screamed, rushing over to him. “Please don’t be dead! Please don’t be dead!” she begged. She put her head on Johnny’s chest to listen for a heartbeat.

“What are you doing?” Johnny groaned.

She sat up, saw his eyes open, and threw her arms around him. “Thank God you’re all right!”

“If you squeeze me any harder, you might just finish me off,” he said.

They crawled back under the tower, this time being careful to touch nothing. Within five minutes, the storm had passed over. A light rain continued to fall, but all the noise of the thunder rumbled a goodbye. Johnny stood up, a bit achy, and walked over to the car battery.

“At least it didn’t explode,” he said.

“You mean it could have?” Emmy asked.

“Sure.”

“You mean we could have been covered in battery acid? You never told me that!”

“You’re a smart girl. I don’t have to spell everything out for you, do I?”

She just shook her head and muttered, “Incredible.”

Johnny pulled a pocket multimeter from his bag and tested the battery with it. “Hmm,” he said. “It’s not fully charged, but it does have some power.”

“Get down!” Emmy urgently whispered as she pounced on him, knocking him to the ground.

“What are you—?”

“Shh! Look!”

Two men passed through the Granville House property, heading in the same direction that Ben had just gone.

“Do you know them?” asked Emmy.

“Yeah,” Johnny replied. “The white guy in the overcoat is Old Man Warner. He owns a drugstore and soda shop near Duke University. The black man is a hobo. I think his name is Clarence. He came to my house on Halloween night. That mysterious boy who helped us with the Confederate gold case put a note in my trick-or-treat bag about him.”

“*What?* When?”

“When we were trick-or-treating, of course!”

“What did the note say?”

“It said to beware of Clarence! And for good reason! Look at what he’s carrying!”

Clarence was toting something long and thin in his left hand.

“Is that a stick?” asked Emmy.

“No,” said Johnny. “It’s a Winchester 1892—a rifle.”

“A *gun*? Are you sure?”

“I’m a boy. I know about guns.” He stood up. “Let’s go.”

“Home, I hope?”

“If you want to, but I’m going to warn Ben. If he finds the body they’ve been hiding, there’s no telling what they’ll do.”

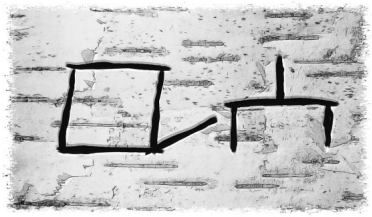
Johnny could see Emmy struggle, and he wished now he’d never stopped by to ask her along on this adventure. But she didn’t disappoint him. “Okay,” she finally said. “Let’s go.”

Johnny grabbed his tools and stuffed them back into his bag. Then they scampered across the field toward the forest behind the Granville House property. They quickly found the path the men had taken into the forest and made their way down through the thicket of trees.

Carved into the first tree immediately next to the path were two more symbols. Johnny and Emmy had seen the first one, which looked like a hat with a pointy brim, on the gatepost out front when they came back to examine the coffin. Only this hat didn’t have the pointy brim. The symbol beside it looked like an upside down goal post.

Johnny committed them to memory in case they might hold a clue to what to expect down the path. They walked on.

A minute later, they heard a loud *boom*.



They froze in their tracks, their eyes wide.

Emmy spoke first: “Tell me that was more thunder.”

Johnny could barely breathe. “I wish I could,” he said. “That . . . was a gunshot. And it was close.”

They broke into a run in the direction of the noise, which came from down the path. They quickly topped a small rise at the same time a break in the clouds appeared. The raindrops falling from the trees surrounding them glistened like tiny prisms. Breaking through the trees, they came to a small clearing.

A rainbow shone through the remaining mist. At the end where the rainbow met the ground stood the hobo Clarence, along with Mr. Warner.

Ben’s body lay facedown on the ground at their feet.

Rage filled Johnny as he picked up a rock and ran at them. “Get away from him!” he screamed. He threw the rock as hard as he could.

It hit Clarence squarely on the leg, and he recoiled, dropping the rifle in response. “I—I didn’t mean to,” Clarence said. “I only wanted to scare him away. He ’us trespassin’!”

Johnny flung himself beside Ben’s body. He grabbed Ben’s wrist and checked for a pulse.

Faint. But he was still alive.

Mr. Warner stood stock-still.

“Help me turn him over!” Johnny hollered at the men.

Neither moved, frozen in fear. Emmy ran up and instantly took hold to pull while Johnny pushed. Together, they got Ben over on his back. Blood had pooled over his shirt and onto the dirt. He was badly

wounded.

Clarence caught sight of the face of the man he had shot and gasped loudly. “No! Oh, Lord, no!”

He ran to the body and knelt beside it. “Dear God, what’ve I done? My son! Ben! I shot my *own boy*!” He wailed, pulling Ben’s body close to him. “I didn’t *mean* to! I’m sorry, boy! I didn’t mean to!”

Johnny gaped at him. “Ben’s . . . your *son*?”

“I didn’t know he still lived around here. I haven’t seen him in years. I thought he moved away. He wasn’t here last I came,” Clarence babbled. His wails turned to sobs. “I killed him! I killed my boy!”

Emmy started to weep. Mr. Warner sat on a rock, his face in his hands.

Johnny felt shell-shocked. He couldn’t believe what he was seeing. The scene was like something in a James Cagney movie. Only this was really happening. He felt sick—all the while wishing there was something he could do. Some way he could help.

“*Help him,”* the voice had said to him. “*Help him.”* Johnny reached into his bag.

He felt the cloth. He pulled it out and handed it to Clarence. “He’s not dead,” Johnny said. “Use this to put pressure on the wound. Try to stop the bleeding.”

Clarence did, muttering through his tears, “Please, God, no! Not my boy, please!”

Johnny turned to Emmy. “Go for help,” he told her. “Doc Willis, Deputy Miller, anybody! Tell them there’s been an accident. Ben Huck has been shot. Tell them where we are!”

Emmy looked at him, pale and frozen with fear. He barked at her, “*Emmy!* Go! Hurry!” She snapped out of it, nodded, and took off back down the path toward the water tower.

Johnny turned to Mr. Warner, who was still in shock. “Give me your coat!” Johnny ordered.

Warner didn’t move.

Johnny went to him and shook him. “Mr. Warner! I need your coat to cover him and keep him warm!”

Warner’s hands trembled as he fumbled with the buttons on his overcoat. He then took it off and handed it to Johnny.

Johnny took the coat to Clarence and Ben. “Keep the pressure on,” he told Clarence, who nodded, still weeping. Johnny draped Warner’s coat over Ben, tucking it in and around Clarence’s arms.

Seconds later, Karl Mangle emerged from the woods. He walked up briskly. *“Was ist los?”* he said. “I heard a gunshot and—” He stopped, taking in the scene, and then bellowed at Clarence, “*Donnerwetter!* What have you done?”

“I didn’t mean to, Boss,” Clarence said. “I saw a feller from behind. He was pokin’ around, and I thought I’d give him a good scare.” Clarence wiped Ben’s brow with his left hand, all the while keeping the compress firm against the wound. “I never was a good shot. Can’t hit a thing I aim at, and here I was tryin’ to miss . . . and I shot him! I shot my own son!”

Mangle was visibly shaken. “Your son?” he said. “You never told me you had a son around here! *Es tut mir leid*—I’m sorry, Clarence!”

Johnny exploded. “You’re sorry? You’re *sorry*? Why? Because it’s his *son* who was shot instead of some other random person you don’t care about?”

Mr. Warner moaned, “We’re going to jail, aren’t we?”

“*Ruhig sein*, Otis. Be quiet,” Mangle said. He looked at Johnny. “What are you getting at, young man?”

“This isn’t the first time something like this happened, is it?”

Mangle swallowed. “I don’t—”

“I know about the body you’ve been hiding!”

Warner jumped up and said, “What? You shot someone *before*?”

“Sit *down*, Otis!” Mangle snapped. “Listen, Johnny, I don’t know what you think you know—”

“I don’t *think* I know anything!” Johnny interrupted. “I heard you and Clarence talking about moving her body.”

Mangle and Clarence exchanged confused glances. “Whose body?” Clarence asked.

“Rakia,” Johnny said. “You moved her from down by the river, and then you moved her out of the coffin in the crawl space of Granville House! Don’t deny it!”

Mangle exhaled and looked down. “Very well. *Ich werde nicht.* I won’t.”

“You buried her here!” Johnny shouted. “That’s what Ben was looking for! And you shot him because of it!”

Mangle held up his hand. “Enough!” he said. He walked directly up to Johnny and scowled down at him. Then he continued past him to the edge of the clearing. A clump of low-hanging tree boughs butted up against a boulder. Mangle pulled one of the branches back, revealing a lean-to hidden behind it. It was dark inside and impossible to see what lay within. “Rakia is right here,” he said. “You may as well see her, since you know all about her.”

Johnny swallowed, stood, walked boldly over to Mangle, and peered into the darkness of the lean-to. A powerful, pungent, stinging odor assaulted his nostrils. He had smelled it before, and he knew where. He looked back at Mr. Warner. It was that day at his drugstore. Johnny turned back to the interior of the lean-to and waited for his eyes to adjust to the dark.

In the back of the makeshift room stood a large, metal tub. A long, copper tube wound out from it. Beneath the tub, a small fire burned.

“It’s a still,” Mangle said. “We brew *mondschein* here—moonshine liquor.”

Johnny stepped back, confused. “So Rakia’s not here?” he asked.

Mangle shook his head. “*Nein,* she is. My wife comes from Bulgaria. Rakia is the name of the liquor they brew. Frieda knew the recipe and how to make it—her family had a still while she was growing up. Rakia sells well here.”

“But moonshine’s illegal, isn’t it?”

“It shouldn’t be,” said Mr. Warner bitterly. “Prohibition was repealed years ago. But the senators here in North Carolina think they know better. ’Tain’t right.”

“I sell it to make money on the side,” Mangle said. “My son’s medical bills are *sehr* expensive—more than a professor’s salary can carry.”

Johnny’s face reddened. “I’m sorry, Professor Mangle. I should have known you wouldn’t—”

“*Nein*. How could you know? I might have thought the same thing myself.”

“So this is what those symbols mean? The pointy hat in front of Granville House and the two at the head of the trail leading back here.”

“Hobo code,” Mangle explained. “The first one means that you can get liquor where the arrow points. The two together mean that this is the place to get it.

“It’s over now,” Mangle continued. “The sheriff will shut us down. Probably arrest us. And if the doctor doesn’t get here soon . . .”

Just then, Clarence cried out, “Ben!”

Johnny’s heart sank. He couldn’t breathe. His worst fear had happened. Ben had died, and he had been unable to help him. He bowed his head.

But Clarence wasn’t upset; he was happy. “Ben! You’re all right! Talk to me, boy!”

Johnny’s head darted up. Ben was moving. He slowly sat up, looked at Clarence, and said, “Pops? So I guessed right. You *are* here. When I heard about Rakia—”

Clarence laughed, holding Ben tight. “You know me. Never one to be far away from a spirit.”

“What happened?” Ben asked.

“I shot you. Sorry about that. I meant to hit that tree yonder.”

“You always was a lousy shot. But I ain’t shot—least I don’t think so.”

Clarence hugged Ben long and hard. “Thank God you’re all right,” Clarence said.

When they broke apart, Ben pulled away Warner’s coat and the cloth with it and tossed them aside.

Warner stood over Ben, scratching his scruffy whiskers. “Makes no sense,” Warner said. “You were bleeding like a stuck pig.”

Just then, Doc Willis and Emmy crashed through the trees and into the clearing. “Someone has been shot?” the doctor asked.

Mangle pointed at Ben. “This man here,” he said. “At least we thought so.” He looked at Johnny curiously.

“He crumpled down soon as I fired,” Clarence said. “Shot him in the back, or so I thought.”

The doctor inspected the back of Ben’s shirt.

A bullet hole.

He then inspected Ben’s back where the bullet would have entered.

Nothing.

“Well, there’s a hole in the shirt, all right,” the doctor said, “but it must not have come from a bullet. There’s no wound site.”

“We found him . . . lying facedown,” said Emmy, still breathless from running for the doctor. “He was bleeding from his chest.”

“Might he have punctured his chest on a rock when he fell?” Mangle suggested.

“Let’s see,” the doctor said. He lifted Ben’s shirt to inspect his chest. “I don’t know what to tell you, but there’s no wound on his chest either. I can’t see anyplace where the blood would have come from.”

Clarence heaved a sigh of relief. “Praise be!” he shouted. “He musta tripped and knocked hisself out when he fell. I didn’t shoot ya after all, son! Maybe my aim *is* improvin’.”

Ben smiled and said, “Well, that would be a miracle.”

Emmy scowled. “But there’s blood all over him!” she said. “Where did it come from?”

Ben looked at the front of his shirt, then stuck his pinky finger through a hole the size of a bullet in the exact same spot as the hole on the back of his shirt.

As they all crowded around, inspecting Ben, Johnny discreetly removed the cloth from Warner’s coat and put it inside his jacket, zipping it in.

Clarence looked into his son’s eyes. “Boy, you’re right,” Clarence said. “I believe we have witnessed a miracle.”

Mangle stood up and looked straight at Johnny. “*Ja,*” he said, “I believe we have.”

Just then, Deputy Miller entered the clearing and took a deep breath. “Weeelll,” he drawled, “looks like somebody’s got some explaining to do.”

Chapter Twenty

Professor Mangle was right. Deputy Miller did shut down the moonshining operation. He confiscated the still and the rifle and had them tear down the lean-to. But he didn't arrest anyone, partly because of Mangle's story, and partly because there was no point. "Nobody appears to have been shot," he said, "and this county may be dry, but the next one over isn't."

Professor Mangle accepted full responsibility, so the deputy did take him to the sheriff's station to make a statement.

Mr. Warner headed back to his drugstore, mourning the loss of the still. "'Tain't right," he muttered. "Just ain't right."

Ben was still a bit dazed by all that had happened, but not so much that he couldn't suppress a laugh. "Pops, leave it to you to hide a still inside a coffin!" he said. Father and son both threw back their heads and busted out in laugher.

"I don't get what's so funny," Johnny said.

"I don't expect I've told you about my Grams," Ben answered.

"That woman was a bona fide hero," Clarence said.

"What did she do?" Emmy asked.

"She was the first one on her plantation to escape," Ben explained. "Others tried, but none of 'em made it, 'cept Grams. Got all the way to Canada. And the route she took was along the—"

"Underground Railroad!" Emmy exclaimed.

"Right," Clarence said, nodding. "My mama was a brave woman. She went on to help a lot of others find their way to freedom too. So as a way of remembering her, I wander up and down the route she took, imaginin' all the things she went through to get herself—and them others—free."

"But I still don't get what you thought was so funny," Johnny said.

A big grin stretched over Ben's face. "Well, you know that the leader of the Underground Railroad was—"

"Levi Coffin," Emmy interrupted again.

"Right. But what you don't know is that the name of the man Levi worked alongside of—the man known as the founder of the Underground Railroad—was . . . William *Still*."

Clarence laughed again. "No one can say as I ain't got me a sense of humor!" Father and son laughed as they made their way to Ben's home.

Johnny and Emmy were both stunned as they walked home.

"What in the world just happened?" Emmy asked before she went inside her house.

“I don’t know,” Johnny replied, shaking his head. “I really . . . do not know.”

Emmy shook her head as she opened the door and disappeared inside. Johnny crossed his yard to the shed. He went in and emptied his bag on the workbench. He replaced the tools and unfurled the cloth.

It was spotless.

This is so strange, Johnny thought. *Why did the cloth heal McDuff and Ben, but not Steve? Or did it actually heal anyone? Maybe the hole in Ben’s shirt had already been there, or perhaps a stick or rock had made it when he fell. But why did he fall when Clarence fired the gun if he hadn’t been hit? And why was there no blood on the cloth?* It just didn’t add up.

Johnny’s mind was a complete jumble. He couldn’t think straight, and he was exhausted from the afternoon’s events and from lack of sleep. He folded the cloth and started to take it back inside when he saw his father step out of the house.

Johnny ducked back into the shed. There was no way for him to go in without being seen by his father. And he knew that if he tried to sneak the cloth into the house, his father would find it and confiscate it. He could think of only one thing to do. He rolled it up and stuffed it into a small gap between the workbench and the shed wall, then stacked some boards over the gap. Then he grabbed his bag, exited the shed, and headed for the house.

His father met him halfway. “Have fun at Emmy’s?” Harold asked.

Johnny took a deep breath. “No,” he said. “You probably know I didn’t have dinner there.”

Harold nodded. “Yes, I know. I just got the strangest phone call from Deputy Miller and Karl Mangle, who were both at the sheriff’s station.”

Johnny exhaled slowly. “I just wanted to finish my lightning experiment . . . and then we saw Ben, and . . . things . . . happened.”

Why isn't he livid? Johnny wondered.

Harold regarded him evenly. "Yes, things always seem to 'happen' with you." He peered over his glasses at Johnny, who wondered when the boom was going to be lowered. He wished his father would hurry up and get it over with. He just wanted to go inside and try to sleep.

Harold sniffed and said, "Well, at any rate, it seems you are a hero again."

Johnny blinked and shook his head. "What?"

"You broke up an illegal moonshine operation," Harold replied patiently. "You also reunited a father and son, as I understand it."

"Actually, I feel kind of bad about the still," Johnny said. "Professor Mangle was just trying to raise money to help Steve."

Harold nodded. "Yes, but he said he realizes how foolish it was to do it that way. He was quite impressed that you stood up to him the way you did. And of course, Deputy Miller is your greatest champion."

Realization was slowly dawning on Johnny. "Wait . . . does this mean . . . I'm not in trouble?"

"I haven't decided yet," Harold replied. "I don't know what I'm going to do with you, John. I honestly don't. But while I try to figure it out . . . how can I punish a hero?" He turned and walked back inside the house.

Johnny blinked several times, still dazed.

This had been one of the strangest days of his life.

But even stranger days lay ahead.

Epilogue

The next week was a complete blur. Johnny was still so dazed by what had happened with Ben and Professor Mangle, and by his father's reaction to it all, that he could barely concentrate on his schoolwork. And he was still having trouble sleeping. He needed something to clear his mind. So he was extremely happy when on Sunday, Fiona set his breakfast before him and said, "What do you say we do something fun after church today?"

"Like what?" he asked.

She sat down beside him. “Well, the weather’s beautiful, and I’m thinking it might be the perfect day for a ride. There won’t be many more of these lovely days once winter lets loose. Thanksgiving was a few days ago, and I usually hang up my saddle after that. So . . . are you up for it?”

Johnny thought it was the greatest idea he’d ever heard. “Yes! Absolutely! I am completely up for it!”

“Well, don’t hold back, John Avery; tell me how you really feel!” Her eyes twinkled. “Eat your breakfast, then. You’ll need your energy to keep up with me!”

They’d been racing across the hills for the last ten minutes. Johnny looked over his shoulder to see Fiona at least four lengths behind him.

“C’mon! Can’tcha catch me?” he called back to her.

“Wait! Hold up, John Avery!”

Johnny smiled, reining Toby in. He knew Fiona was letting him win their race, but he didn’t care. He liked being in front all the same. “Whoa, Toby,” he said. “Let’s let the slowpoke catch up.”

Fiona pulled up alongside him.

“What’s the matter? You’re not tired, are you?” Johnny teased.

“Me? Tired? *Aach*, no!” she answered between gasps. “Just because my lungs are about to burst? What could make you think I’m tired?”

“You sure? Your face looks kinda blue. That’s a sign you’re not getting enough oxygen.”

“Not a bit of it! It’s the sun playing tricks on yer eyes, lad. I’m as fit as a fiddle, and don’t you mistake it.”

“All right then. Let’s race to that tree. Ready . . .”

“Hold on. I may not be tired, but poor Earl here, he needs a moment.” Fiona breathed in deeply, letting the air back out in one long puff. Then she looked at him and straightened her back. “We’ll trot a bit,” she declared with a slight nod.

Their gait was closer to a walk than a trot, but Johnny decided to say nothing about it. It was enough to be outside with the soft wind blowing through the trees and the damp earth thudding softly under the horses’ hooves.

Once Fiona had regained her air, she leaned back in the saddle and said, “And just when did you become such a good rider, John Avery Whittaker, that’s what I’d like to know! If ye aren’t careful, you’ll put Earl here to shame!”

Johnny smiled. “I learned from watching you.”

“I don’t see how you could do that, unless you have eyes in the back of your head. You’re always in front of me!”

They both laughed a bit, and as they quietly sauntered on, Johnny suddenly realized that Fiona had become more than a stepmother to him. She’d become his mother. Not that she could ever replace Janneth. She couldn’t do that, nor did she want to. She’d said as much many times over the years. But for all the effort Johnny once put into keeping Fiona at arm’s length, he now found his arm getting shorter all the time. With the tension going on between him and his dad, it was a comfort having Fiona around.

He had the sudden urge to tell Fiona about the journal and the cloth and ask whether she thought the cloth could have healing power. He thought he could trust her, of all people. Then an idea occurred to him.

“Fiona?”

“Yes, lad?”

“Do you remember back in Scotland, after you married Father, he bought you that really pretty dress?”

“Of course. It was my wedding dress. Such a pity. I had to throw it away because the dog spilled a bowl full of chocolate cake batter all over it.”

Johnny hesitated. “Yeah. Well, the dog didn’t spill it. I did.”

Fiona didn’t flinch at the news but simply responded, “You did, eh? Well, why did you do that?”

“I don’t know.”

“Well, why are you telling me about it now?”

“I guess because I wanted you to know that I’m really sorry about it. I shouldn’t have done it. And I wouldn’t have . . . if I’d known how nice you are.”

Johnny waited for her response. Would she be upset? Would she pull away? Knowing her reaction to this question would help him decide whether he could open up about the more-important question at hand.

Her reaction surprised him. Her lips pursed, and she looked over to him and said, “I appreciate your honesty, John Avery, even if it is a bit late. But . . . would it disappoint you too much if I told you that I always knew you did it?”

“You did?”

A dimpled smile formed on her face. “The dog was smart, but not even he could make handprints.”

Johnny wasn’t one to blush, but he did then. “Why didn’t you ever say anything?”

“I suppose I figured you’d been through enough, with your mother dying and me comin’ in.”

They rode on in silence. Johnny thought of Janneth. Even though he was young when his mother died, he never quite escaped the pain of her passing. The effect of it seemed to sear itself on his soul, making the slightest recollection of it as painful as the day it happened.

Fiona must have guessed what he was thinking. She rode up beside him and touched his arm. “Things have been pretty rough for you, I know,” she said. “But the thing to remember is that God has a purpose in it all. You might not be able to see it. In fact, you may never be able to see it. But trust me—no . . . trust Him—He does have a purpose for it all.”

Johnny sighed. He’d heard such words before, and they always seemed to him to be the things people said when they didn’t have a good answer. “If you say so,” he responded.

Fiona reined in her horse. Johnny followed suit. “No. Not because I say so,” she said. “Because it’s true.”

Johnny didn’t want to be disrespectful, but he did want to be honest with her. “It’s just kind of hard to believe when He takes your mother away,” he said quietly. “I mean, you can’t know how it feels because you haven’t had anything taken away from you.”

He could tell his comment struck her. She looked down at the reins in her hands and took a deep breath. “You’re right, John Avery. I haven’t. But I’ve seen God at work in those who have. Even though bad things happened to them, they knew that God was still there, loving and caring for them.”

She raised her eyes, looking into the sky as the soft wind caressed their faces. “We must have faith,” she continued simply. “If we put our faith in God, He’ll never fail us. Never.” Then she turned her gaze to him, looking gently into his eyes. “I want you to always remember that. Okay?”

Johnny shrugged. “I guess.”

“In fact,” Fiona said as an impish grin formed over her face, “I want you to think about that . . . while I’m racin’ you to the Great Tree!” And with a kick to the haunches of her horse, she leapt into a gallop.

Johnny scowled. “Hey! No fair!” He spurred his horse after her.

They raced across the field, Fiona in the lead but Johnny gaining on her. The Great Tree had become the finish line for their races. The huge oak looked to be a hundred years old, massive in height and impressive in girth. After their races, they would stop and lie down beneath it, surveying the clouds and pondering the questions of life. It had become his favorite tree, and he would not let Fiona beat him to it! He spurred his horse mercilessly.

"You cheated!" he called out to her.

"Posh!" she laughed, looking back at him. "Can'tcha catch me, lad? You're not getting tired, are ye?"

At that moment, Johnny saw what Fiona did not. She had topped the rise, and she had apparently forgotten about the long, thick branch of a beautifully shaped elm tree that stretched across the path. The branch hung low enough to require anyone on horseback to duck under its massive sprawl.

"Look out!" Johnny screamed.

But it was too late. Fiona had barely turned around when the branch met her full force directly on the forehead. Her scream was cut off as her head snapped back and her body flew off her horse as she tumbled to the ground.

"Fiona!"

An hour later, Fiona awoke. "Harold," she whispered groggily.

"Shh. I'm right here," he said.

"I had the most real dream. I was riding with John Avery . . ."

"That was no dream. You were riding. Apparently you had a little run-in with the branch of an elm."

"Oh . . . yes. Dumb place to put a tree—in the middle of a forest." She smiled. "Where's Johnny?"

“I’m here,” Johnny announced. “I’m so glad you’re all right. When I saw you sprawled out on the ground . . . and then you didn’t wake up . . .”

“How did I get back home?” she asked.

“John rode back to get me,” Harold explained. “I drove the truck.”

“Out there? How did you manage that with no roads?”

“Well, let’s just say the truck will need a bit of servicing.”

“We were worried about you, Mommy,” Charlie said in a small voice.

“No need to worry, love.”

“We were going to take you to the hospital,” Johnny said, “but Doc Willis is always home on Sundays, and he lives a few blocks away. I was just leaving to get him.”

“Nonsense,” Fiona said. “Don’t bother the man on the Sabbath. I’m fine. Aside from a little headache.” She moved to stand up. “I’d better get supper on the table.”

Harold stopped her, saying, “No, you just lie here and rest for a bit.”

“I told you, I’m fine,” she protested. “It’s late. You must all be starved.”

Charlie fairly hid behind her father, her eyes wide with fear. “It’s not very late,” she squeaked timidly.

“Of course it is, Charlie,” Fiona said. “Why, it’s so dark in here, you can barely see your hand in front of your face.” She sighed. “I must have been out cold for hours.”

Johnny and Harold looked at each other. The room was drenched in light from the afternoon sun. In fact, it was so bright that Johnny had to move out of the glare reflecting off a mirror on the bureau.

Johnny leaned closer, looking into Fiona’s eyes. The whites of both were not white at all but blood red from an internal hemorrhage. Her pupils were also oddly dilated, one as large as a cat’s eye in the

dark, the other not quite so big, but still more than he would expect in a room this bright.

Harold lifted his hand in front of Fiona's face. All five fingers were stretched out. "Fiona, how many fingers am I holding up?" he asked.

She frowned. "Harold, have ye gone daft? I just said it was so dark in here you couldna see your hand!" She sighed. "John Avery, turn on some lights, child."

Johnny didn't know what to do. Fear began to rise within him. "But . . . Dad?"

Johnny saw the look of concern etched on his father's brow. His jaw clenched the same way it had when Johnny's mother got sick with the fever that eventually took her life.

"John, run and get Doc Willis," Harold commanded, fighting to control his voice. Then looking right at him, he mouthed the word *Hurry!* so Fiona and Charlie couldn't hear.

"Yes, sir," Johnny whispered. He could barely breathe for the thought of what seemed to have happened.

Run, he told himself. *Run as fast as you can, and don't let your mind think of anything else but running even faster.*

Johnny and Charlie waited outside on the porch while the doctor examined Fiona. Charlie kept asking questions about the accident, but Johnny kept wishing she would just be quiet. The evening sun had faded below the horizon, and he shivered without its warmth. He began to feel hungry, but he quickly regretted the thought of even caring about food at a time like this.

After what seemed like forever, Harold and Doc Willis walked out of the house. "Thanks for coming, Doc," Harold said softly.

The doctor put on his hat and smiled sympathetically. “It’s my job,” he replied. “I’ll check back in on her in a few days. It may be that internal swelling is the cause of her loss of sight. If so, once it subsides, her sight should return.” He put his hand on Harold’s shoulder. “I know things seem bleak right now, but give it some time. That’s the best we can do.”

Doc Willis shook Harold’s hand, turned and nodded at Johnny and Charlie, and stepped from the porch.

“Daddy,” Charlie asked tearfully, “is Mommy gonna see again?”

“I don’t know, honey,” came the answer. “I don’t know.”

Johnny’s mind seemed to turn as dark and cloudy as the night. And with the darkness came a fear of what might lie waiting for him in the dark. His heart raced, his stomach churned. *Was it my fault?* he thought. *I should have been in front of her.*

His mind replayed the moment of the accident, but this time his horse’s hooves stuck in the mud, and no matter how much he kicked his heels into the horse’s haunches or urged him on, the horse went slower. And then Janneth rode faster. *Wait . . . was it Janneth or Fiona*? *We’re in Scotland, right? No, wait . . . We moved*.

Everything felt so confusing. Johnny couldn’t decide whether he was hungry or tired or whether his Grandpa Jackson would pick him up. And why was his mother screaming? Where did the blood come from? And then . . . the most-pleasant smell, the loveliest sound, the gentlest touch, the sweetest taste, the most-soothing light . . .

“John!”

Johnny saw his father standing in front of him, shimmering like an apparition. He was saying something, but Johnny couldn’t make sense of the words. They sounded as if they came from a tin can . . . as when Johnny had put string through the ends of two tin cans, and then Grandpa Jackson stretched the string tight and talked into his can while Johnny listened through the other. He remembered the beaming smile on Grandpa Jackson’s face when Johnny talked back through his end of the—

A slap hit hard against Johnny's face, stinging him roughly. "Can you hear me, John?" his father said.

The fog that had been clouding his thoughts began to lift. His father squatted in front of him, his face concerned and intense.

Confused, Johnny said, "Yes, sir."

"You're in shock. I know how it feels," Harold said. "From the war."

"I'm sorry," Johnny said.

Charlie cried. "Is Johnny okay?" she asked.

"Yes, dear. He'll be fine." Harold stroked Charlie's face. Johnny wondered why his father never caressed him that way.

"John, that phone call was from my contact overseas," his father said.

Phone call? What phone call? Johnny thought. He suddenly realized he was no longer outside on the porch, but sitting on the couch in their living room. *How did I get here?* he wondered.

His father continued. "He's translated some portions of the journal already. He began with the most-recent entries, the ones your grandfather wrote. John," Harold said pointedly, "Mangle was right. The journal does mention a cloth instilled with the power to heal. Your grandfather knew of its power. But that's not all," he said excitedly.

Johnny's mind still struggled to make sense of what his father was saying. He simply nodded.

"John, listen to me! Focus!"

Johnny tried. He concentrated as hard as he could.

"Your grandfather wrote in the journal that he had possession of the cloth! And that he kept it secure—in his trunk! Do you understand, boy? That cloth is in the trunk up in your room!"

"No, it isn't," Johnny said.

"Yes, it must be—"

“No, Dad,” Johnny interrupted. “I was using it the other day at the water tower.” His mind drifted off. *The water tower. The experiment. I need to go back and get the battery and take it to Ben. Ben! I wonder how he’s feeling?*

Again his father’s voice shook him from his trance. “John! Listen to me. You took the cloth to the water tower? Did you leave it there?”

“No.”

“John, where is the cloth now?” His father’s face had turned from excitement to panic.

Johnny searched his mind for the answer. *Did I get it back? Yes, I’m sure of it. Where did I put it? I came home and . . . the shed!*

“It’s in the shed,” he said, “out in the shed!”

He jumped up from the couch, tore through the kitchen, and bolted out the back door. Harold was right behind him. They raced across the lawn and into the shed.

“I rolled it up,” he said, sliding boards away from the gap between the workbench and the shed wall. “Yeah, I rolled it up and put it right . . .” He reached into the gap.

It was empty.

He probed around with his fingers, jamming his hand down into the gap as far as it would go, scraping his knuckles.

Nothing.

Harold grabbed the workbench and wrested it from the shed wall. The boards splintered with a loud crack! They both peered into the open space.

The cloth was gone.